

AN
ARCHDEMON'S
DILEMMA: HOW TO
LOVE YOUR
ELF BRIDE

16

FUMINORI TESHIMA

ILL. COMTA



An anime-style manga cover illustration. In the foreground, a young woman with long, flowing red hair and large, expressive orange eyes looks upwards with a surprised expression. She has a small blue butterfly perched on her head. She wears a white dress with a large green bow at the collar and a blue skirt. In the background, a young man with dark blue hair and a mischievous grin looks towards the viewer. He has a small earring and is wearing a white shirt. A large, ornate golden sword with a blue gem at its hilt is positioned diagonally across the lower left. The background is dark and moody, with some smoke or mist at the bottom. The title is in the top left, and the volume number and author information are on the right.

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Upon hearing his name called so affectionately, Zagan received a tremendously agonizing shock to his heart.

"We'll continue this later, then... N-Nephelia."

"Th-This is the first time I've heard you call me by my name... Z-Zagan."

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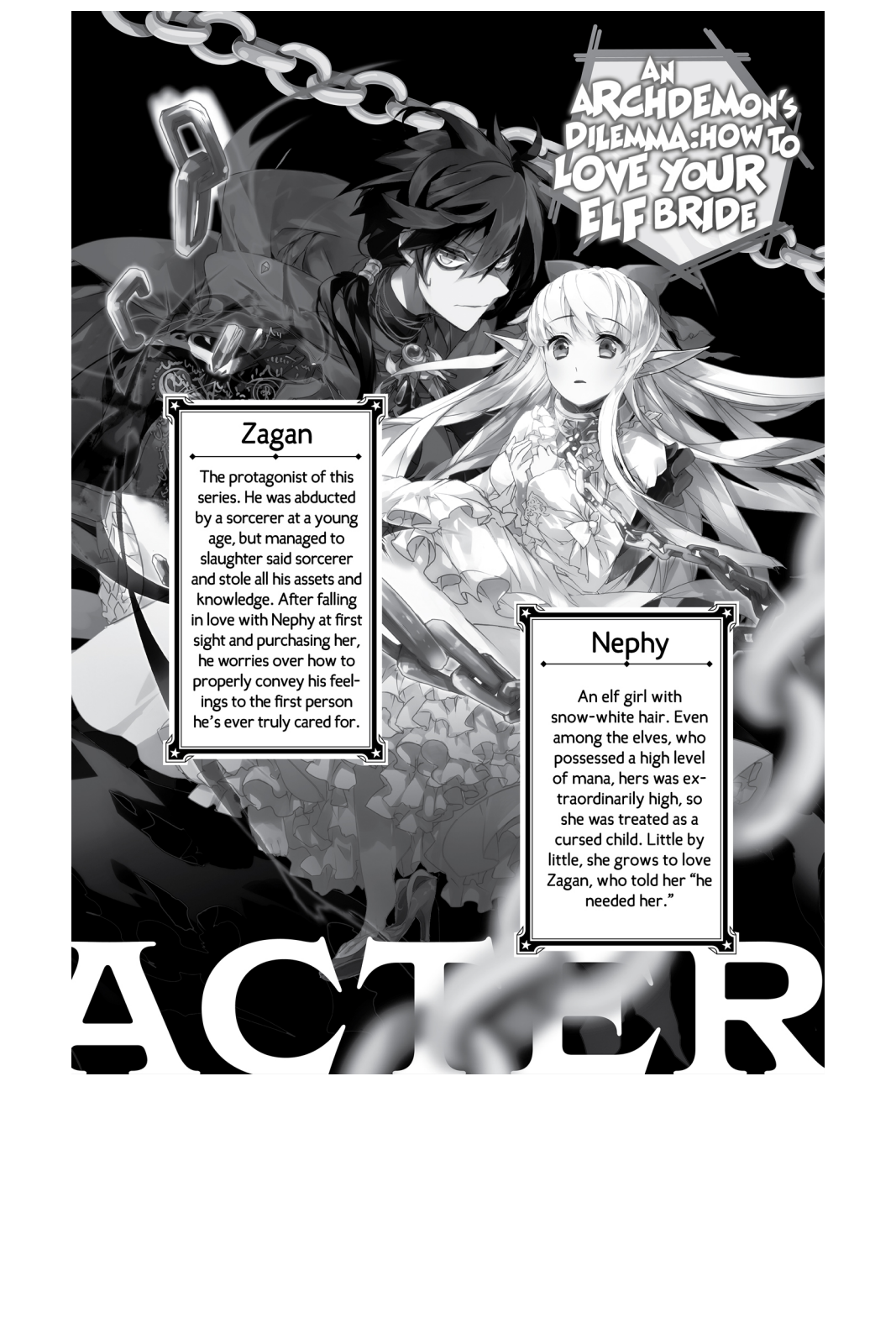
Aaah!
She's even
touching
his ear!

Chastille is shocked by the
sight of a clandestine meeting
between sorcerers!



The voluptuous beauty was nowhere in sight. Instead, she'd been replaced by a raging beast who only knew slaughter.

Bathing in the moonlight, Eligor's figure changed.



AN ARCHDEMON'S DILEMMA: HOW TO LOVE YOUR ELF BRIDE

Zagan

The protagonist of this series. He was abducted by a sorcerer at a young age, but managed to slaughter said sorcerer and stole all his assets and knowledge. After falling in love with Nephy at first sight and purchasing her, he worries over how to properly convey his feelings to the first person he's ever truly cared for.

Nephy

An elf girl with snow-white hair. Even among the elves, who possessed a high level of mana, hers was extraordinarily high, so she was treated as a cursed child. Little by little, she grows to love Zagan, who told her "he needed her."

ACTOR



Barbatos

Zagan's undesirable friend. A skilled sorcerer who is one of the leading Archdemon candidates. Is constantly troubled by Chastille's crybaby side, but still can't leave her alone.



Chastille Lillqvist

An Archangel known as the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. She's a master of the blade, but is far too serious and easily tricked. Lately, those around her suspect she's in a much deeper relationship with her guardian sorcerer, Barbatos, than she lets on, but she vehemently denies it.



Asmodeus

The Archdemon known as the Collector. Possesses immense power even the other Archdemons have to acknowledge as beyond them. She lives for the sake of gathering Spirit Blood.



Foll

Wise Dragon Orobas's daughter and a current Archdemon. She was adopted by Zagan and Nephy. The two of them heavily dote on her, and she is growing at an astonishing pace.



Alshiera

A girl of the Night Clan who has actually lived for an extremely long time. Calls Zagan the Silver-Eyed King. She has an understanding of history that has been lost to man, but tends to refuse to answer any questions about it for some reason.

Marchosias

Once the Archdemon known as the Eldest. He's been revived as a Nephilim, and is plotting behind the scenes while gathering many Archdemons to his cause.

CHAR

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Prologue

“How unusual it is for you to visit me here, Archdemon Naberius.”

Inside Archdemon Palace’s throne room, Zagan and a giant Archdemon faced each other. Zagan sat cross-legged atop his throne, staring down at the visitor, an amused glint in his silver eyes.

Nephy’s birthday party had gone off without a hitch, and the troublesome aftermath of the battle with Shere Khan had been dealt with, so Zagan was in a tremendously good mood. He was sure to laugh off some amount of trouble at this point. In contrast, it was clear that Naberius was perturbed, even through his mask. The giant was a head taller than Zagan, and his muscular brawn even surpassed that of both Zagan and Kimaris.

“I figured it was about time for me to leave,” Naberius finally said after letting out a deliberately long sigh. “I’m just about sick of being used.”

“Like I care. It’s your fault for showing weakness.”

“And you’re the one who’s been exploiting that weakness to your heart’s content!”

Zagan feigned ignorance and averted his gaze. This man was supposed to be a free spirit who could rival Gremory, but after being spared by Alshiera and that whole mess with losing a Sigil of the Archdemon, all of his weaknesses had been exposed to Zagan. And naturally, Zagan had made full use of them.

Both Nephy’s birthday present and the wedding ring came out perfectly.

Well, Alshiera, Nephy, and the others had apparently forced more onto Naberius’s plate, so Zagan could at least understand his desire to complain... Not that he had any obligations to listen to him, of course.

Still, the fact that he’s going out of his way to show himself means there’s still something he needs...

This man was an Archdemon. If he really wanted to run away, he could’ve done so whenever he wanted. Even now, instead of venting to Zagan, he could act more like an Archdemon and demand compensation or go on the offensive. The fact that he was here to give a “farewell” with some idle chatter meant that he was probably probing for information. However, Naberius was only on friendly terms because of their contract, which was now over. Thus, Zagan had no intention of giving him any unnecessary information.

“Don’t play the victim,” Zagan said, smiling coldly. “You knew Asmodeus was after that Spirit Blood when you suggested using the damn thing for Nephys’s present.”

“Oh? I simply tried to fulfill my client’s request. In truth, there was no other way of meeting your demands without using one, right?”

“Hmph...”

In contrast to what he was saying, there was no mockery in Naberius’s tone.

This man’s goal is to create. Perhaps he has no interest in how his creations are used.

It was much like how the desires to collect and monopolize were similar at face value. If he had any interest, it was only until his creations fell into someone’s hands. It was entirely possible he would think nothing of his clients breaking what he’d made right before his eyes.

Eccentrics are difficult to understand. I suppose figuring out that much is pretty good already.

Zagan came to an understanding on his own, completely unaware that he was quite the eccentric among sorcerers himself.

“So? Did you just come here to whine?” Zagan asked, glaring down at Naberius.

“Asmodeus,” Naberius said, a strange chuckle emanating from his throat. “I heard you traded blows with her.”

Zagan narrowed his eyes, not expecting that name to come up.

“I got caught up in her schemes,” Zagan replied.

“I want to get a grasp of how much power she has now. She’s one of my favorites, after all.”

Foll had been the one to actually fight her, but this had happened inside Archdemon Palace. Thus, Zagan had, of course, been observing from beginning to end. It’d been rather backbreaking work doing this while facing Archdemon Glasya-Labolas at the same time, however.

Asmodeus, huh? Foll does really like her.

In a sense, she wasn’t a guest. He considered her more quasi-family. As such, Zagan scoffed.

“She’s called the Collector. I figured such an Archdemon would be at complete odds with the Mystical Artisan.”

“Rashness is an adorable trait, isn’t it? It’s been three hundred...no, three hundred and fifty years since Asmodeus became an Archdemon. Do you know what the first thing she did upon becoming one was?”

“I see... She went straight for your head, didn’t she?”

Now that he thought about it, that made perfect sense. Mystical Artisan Naberius was the Archdemon who handled the most Spirit Blood among all sorcerers throughout history.

“Seeing as you’re both still alive, I suppose it ended in a draw?” Zagan asked.

“Oh dear, she was no more than a little chick who’d just become an Archdemon, you know?” Naberius said, smiling scornfully. “Of course I turned the tables on her. Why, I’m the one who gave her about half the scars on her body.”

According to Foll, Asmodeus was covered in old scars. Zagan had questioned how an Archdemon could have so many visible wounds but hadn’t even considered that it was this man’s doing.

Are wounds dealt by a beholder untreatable?

Dealing with the loss of an entire arm like Raphael had would be one thing, but it was a matter of course for an Archdemon to be able to treat normal wounds without leaving behind any scars. The fact that her scars remained meant that she couldn’t or hadn’t removed them. Still, none of this had anything to do with Zagan, so he returned his focus to Naberius.

“Hmm? She didn’t seem like the type to back down, though,” Zagan said.

“Well...she did crush half my magic eyes, then steal every single magic tool I’d made using Spirit Blood.”

“I’d call that a draw.”

This man’s true identity was a beholder, a monster with ten magic eyes. Losing half of them probably meant he’d met her at full power in his true form. He had some audacity to call that turning the tables on her.

“That girl really had me at a loss,” Naberius said nostalgically. “After that, she went around spreading rumors that all Spirit Blood were cursed gems. I needed them as materials but couldn’t get any.”

“And despite all that, she’s your favorite?”

Naberius blinked like he found Zagan’s reaction wholly unexpected.

“Is it not human to love what’s beautiful?” he asked.

“I can’t deny that...”

Zagan was the one who’d spent his entire fortune upon falling in love with Nephy at first sight. How could he possibly deny such logic?
So I guess he sees her as beautiful.

In Zagan’s eyes, when Lily had no memories, she’d been much like a raw mineral that shined the more it’s polished. After getting her memories back, Asmodeus seemed far too much like a sharp blade that could shatter at any moment for his liking.

“As far as I know, there are only three Archdemons who’ve sought the power to take on all thirteen Archdemons,” Naberius said.

“Hmm...?” Zagan raised his voice in amusement.

“One is the man who declared he will kill the thirteen

Archdemons... That would be you, Zagan.”

“Then I suppose the second is the one who tried creating the Nephilim even if it meant making enemies of all Archdemons, Shere Khan.”

Naberius nodded.

“And the last is the one who tried to steal all Spirit Blood from the thirteen Archdemons, Asmodeus... It’s been three hundred and fifty years. I’m a little curious whether she’s gotten stronger or weaker since then.”

Zagan sank into thought. The last sorcery Asmodeus had displayed, the Calamitous Moon of Hades, had the power to destroy the world. It was the same kind of sorcery as Zagan’s Heaven’s Phosphor and could even be considered more powerful than that.

Zagan had developed his sorcery to be used against Archdemons, Sacred Swords, and Azazel. Calamitous Moon was different. It would surely have engulfed not only this entire town, but even the continent itself. If Foll hadn’t managed to stop her, even if Zagan had done everything he could, he’d have lost his domain in Kianoides. Even the thirteen Archdemons would be helpless before it. It was a dreadful power.

Asmodeus’s goal was to steal back all Spirit Blood from anyone who was in possession of one, not to use them as decorative ornaments. If she couldn’t steal them all, it was only natural for her to conclude that existence itself had to be erased. However, Naberius must’ve seen that power too. He’d been in Archdemon Palace at the time, after all.

“Can’t you tell for yourself?” Zagan asked. “She has enough power to take on all thirteen Archdemons at the same time.”

He was, of course, implying with absolute confidence that if it came down to a fight, he’d beat her.

“When it comes to simple power, I’m sure that’s true,” Naberius mumbled in dissatisfaction. “Still, it worries me that she ended in a draw against the little lady Valefor. It seems she’s caught up with some no-good lot too.”

Zagan had already heard that Asmodeus had sided with Marchosias. This was the Eldest, the man who’d spent a thousand years reigning as the Head Archdemon. Zagan didn’t know what he was paying her to do, but he wasn’t the type of man to let someone run away just because they thought the deal was fishy. Unexpectedly, this apparently worried Naberius.

“Well, I suppose you can say that Valefor has just grown incredibly strong,” Naberius said.

“Now that I think of it, when Marchosias died, you and Bifrons endorsed Foll to be the next Archdemon. Why?”

“That’s because I never took a disciple. The only Archdemon candidates at the time who weren’t a disciple of an Archdemon were you and Valefor.”

Strictly speaking, Kimaris wasn’t either, but he had deep connections to Shere Khan and Orias. Besides, his actual teacher was Gremory, who was Orias’s personal disciple, so she’d surely taught him something.

“Barbatos too,” Zagan corrected him.

“Who’s that?”

Now that he thought about it, it was easy to picture how hopelessly incompatible Barbatos was with this man. It was possible they wouldn’t even be cognizant of each other if they were standing in the same room.

He’s an idiot, but a useful one.

“Oh yes, it seems another former Archdemon candidate has come here recently,” Naberius said. “Who was it again?”

“Earthshaker Vepar? Well, he certainly was an interesting one.”

Thanks to Vepar, Chastille’s birthday had gone rather well. Zagan thought back to the events that happened just two weeks ago, about half a month before Nephy’s birthday.

Chapter I: To a Teacher, a Disciple Snapping at Your Neck is Unexpectedly Cute

“Gremory, do you know the sorcerer named Vepar? He was one of the former Archdemon candidates.”

Around two weeks prior to Nephy’s birthday, Zagan sat on his throne in Archdemon Palace and questioned his subordinate. This old woman was one of the former Archdemon candidates and one of Zagan’s trusted confidants who served as his left hand. She just happened to be here to report on another matter, and after hearing his question, the granny flashed a reluctant smile, showing her yellowing teeth.

“Kee hee, now that name really brings me back... Of course I know Vepar. Among all Archdemon candidates of the time, he possessed the greatest love power right after you.”

“Oh, is that so...?”

Meaning he’d also been one of this granny’s playthings. Zagan had never met Vepar before, but he suddenly felt deep sympathy for him.

“So what about him?” Gremory asked.

“He entered Kianoides a few days ago. It doesn’t look like he’s prodding into our affairs, so as far as I can tell, he’s not an enemy. However, there’s Marchosias to consider. I want a grasp of what kind of guy he is.”

Shere Khan had been defeated. Bifrons was dead. Zagan didn’t have a particular reason to be wary of a sorcerer entering his domain, even if they were a former Archdemon candidate. That should have been the case, anyway, but things had changed a little because of the incident with Asmodeus.

A former Archdemon candidate was essentially a pseudo-Archdemon. They were the most powerful sorcerers in the world. Depending on the circumstances, the power they possessed could pose a threat. One on the level of Barbatos or Gremory couldn’t be ignored.

“And if possible, you want to know what he’s here for too, I suppose?” Gremory asked with a nod. This granny usually did whatever the hell she wanted, but she truly was a talented sorcerer. Zagan didn’t have to explain a thing to her.

“If I had to guess, I’d say Vepar isn’t here because of Marchosias,

but because of something to do with Asmodeus.”

“Meaning?”

“Vepar is Asmodeus’s disciple,” Gremory answered with an air of amusement.

Zagan’s eyes widened upon hearing that unexpected news.

Setting aside her personality as Lily, to think Asmodeus would ever take a disciple...

She was less of a misanthropist and more someone who hated the entirety of humanity itself. That was understandable, considering the life she’d lived, but then how did someone like that end up teaching someone else sorcery?

“Well, half of the Archdemon candidates from last year were disciples of Archdemons,” Gremory said. “He just happens to be one of them. I’m pretty sure he has no relation to Marchosias.”

“No, considering the fact that Asmodeus is working for Marchosias, it’s highly probable he’ll end up getting involved. Even if that’s not the case now, we don’t know how things will turn out.”

“You certainly have a point there...”

It would be far too arrogant to force him to obey Zagan’s commands, but they had to at least grasp his intentions. The old woman pondered over how to contact him, a sharp glint in her eye that differed from her usual carefree behavior.

Marchosias—the previous owner of Zagan’s Sigil—was over a thousand years old and was supposed to have died last year. However, after being revived as a Nephilim, he’d stolen Shere Khan’s Sigil and returned to his seat as an Archdemon. He also happened to be Zagan’s benefactor, who’d taught him the means to survive when Zagan was no more than a waif dying by the roadside.

Asmodeus’s attack the other day had also been at Marchosias’s command. Zagan had no idea what the man was scheming, but he had a premonition that he would come to blows with him in the not-too-distant future.

I need to be prepared...

To that end, he needed power and information. And due to those necessities, he wanted to keep the former Archdemon candidates in check.

“Still, an Archdemon candidate, hmm?” Gremory said, an air of nostalgia in her voice. “It’s been a year since then. The lineup of Archdemons sure has changed, hasn’t it?”

“Yes, but there’s a need to make one more change to that lineup.”

Among the Archdemon candidates from that time, Zagan had inherited Marchosias’s Sigil, while Foll had obtained Bifrons’s. They hadn’t been Archdemon candidates, but Nephy had inherited Orias’s Sigil, while Shere Khan’s disciple Shax had obtained Head Archdemon

Andrealphus's Sigil. Plus, not only had these four seats been replaced, but Archdemon Furas, an expert at leaping through space, was beyond recovery and under Zagan's protection. Well, more like in the middle of trying to seduce one of his subordinates, but still...

In any case, a good number of the Sigils had ended up in Zagan's camp. It was reaching the point where the other Archdemons couldn't simply remain spectators.

"There were ten candidates a year ago, correct?" Zagan asked, leaning back into his throne.

Half of those were in Zagan's camp now. Foll and Zagan were now Archdemons. Gremory and her partner Kimaris were his advisors. His bad friend Barbatos was one too.

"Nine, to be precise," Gremory replied, nodding. "Decarabia was recommended, but was never actually a candidate."

Decarabia/Stella, cursed by the King's Silver Eye, had completely lost her ego, so she couldn't really call herself a sorcerer at the time. After Decarabia's personality had vanished, Stella had regained her original personality, but she'd chosen to stand on the side of the Angelic Knights.

"The remaining four are Earthshaker Vepar, Godsight Flauros, Gaoler Acheron, and Thunder God Furfur," Gremory added.

"Were they not invited to Bifrons's evening ball?"

The majority of sorcerers in Zagan's camp had joined his fold during Bifrons's evening ball, including Gremory, Kimaris, and the new Archdemon Shax.

Gremory shook her head and replied, "They were invited but didn't participate. And obviously, considering what happened, they made the right choice."

Because Bifrons had resurrected the Sludge Demon Lord, everyone there had nearly died, which meant those four possessed proper wariness as sorcerers.

"If possible, I'd like to get them onboard too. I don't necessarily need them as subordinates, but it'd be a pain if they end up being used as Marchosias's pawns."

"It sure would."

There were terrifying unnamed sorcerers who weren't former Archdemon candidates too. Shax was one such example. There were also sorcerers like Behemoth and Leviathan, where it was actually curious that they hadn't already become Archdemons.

From now on, Zagan needed to contact such sorcerers. Eldest Marchosias's name was such a big deal that he had to be on guard against all of them.

I can't let him get the upper hand on me like Shere Khan...

Zagan had indeed tried to be as careful as possible back then, but

due to a serious lack of information, he'd exposed Nephteros, Richard, and many of his subordinates to danger. It'd been a shameful failure as a king.

It was unlikely for sorcerers at the level of former Archdemon candidates to so easily give away their locations, though. After thinking things through, Zagan shook his head, as things had clearly gone off track.

"Let's get back to the main point," he said. "We're done with the aftermath of Shere Khan's attack. Nephy's birthday present is finished. I don't mind heading out to meet him in person, but as an acquaintance, you're better suited to the task. Find out what he's here for. If he can be of use, then you may use him for *that case* if you want."

If that turned out to be a lot of work, it was the king's duty to clean things up. Right now, Barbatos and Chastille were more important.

"Kee hee! Understood!"

Gremory skipped out of the throne room in high spirits.

Did I get ahead of myself...?

Watching her back, Zagan felt a little anxious. Now that it was quiet again, he leaned back into his throne, then let out a massive sigh, enduring the rage he felt and controlling the massive amount of mana building up within him. His suddenly overflowing mana shook Archdemon Palace—no, Kianoides itself. Zagan brushed back his bangs.

Lately, I haven't been able to cuddle with Nephy at all.

This was a serious problem. Zagan had to deal with all the aftermath of the battle and making Nephy's birthday present, while Nephy had just become an Archdemon and was taking lessons in celestial mysticism. Thus, even though they were in the same castle, they weren't able to see each other very often. What's more, that idiot Marchosias was apparently starting some kind of dastardly scheme, so it was going to get busy again.

I don't have any time to waste. I need to go on a date with Nephy!

Zagan's spirit was liable to break, leading to the destruction of Kianoides. And as he agonized over the power needed to keep that urge in check, another knock came at the door. Zagan shifted his focus to the person on the other side, then widened his eyes in surprise.

"Hmm, how unusual it is for you to visit me here, Archangel Richard Flammarak."



"If now's a bad time, I can come back later."

Perhaps having interpreted the earlier tremor as some sort of

trouble, the Angelic Knight at the door spoke with a stiff expression. He had wavy blond hair and blue eyes, his handsome features reflected his upright nature, and his slender body was even taller than Zagan's. Under a pure white mantle, he wore the noble Anointed Armor of an Archangel. This was Archangel Richard Flammarak. While serving Chastille as a regular Angelic Knight, he'd ended up being selected to serve as Nephteros's guard while in the church. And now, somehow or other, he was in possession of a Sacred Sword and had been promoted to the position of exclusive knight of Lady Oberon's daughter.

Zagan had once disapproved of Richard's desire to court his sister-in-law, but now he recognized him as a man worthy of the respect of an Archdemon. Richard was supposed to be at Nephteros's side at all times, but here he was on his own.

"No, I don't mind. Come in," Zagan said, shaking his head.

With that, Richard entered the throne room and bowed respectfully.

"It has been a long time, Lord Archdemon Zagan."

"It hasn't really been all that long," Zagan replied, scoffing. "Well, I guess a sorcerer's sense of time differs from that of an Angelic Knight."

That was one of the problems that Richard and Nephteros would have to face. Even after becoming the wielder of a Sacred Sword, Richard was still a normal human, whereas Nephteros was both a high elf and a sorcerer. Elves lived far longer than humans, so she couldn't match his lifespan. This man wasn't one to be ignorant of such problems, so Richard gritted his teeth and endured the thought.

That said, it's a problem for the two of them to discuss between themselves.

Zagan would naturally lend his strength if they asked, but it wasn't his place to question them about it now.

"Well, whatever," Zagan said. "I just happen to have a question for you too."

"For me?" Richard asked, blinking in surprise.

"Yes... It's a rather difficult problem. I believe you may be the only one who can provide me with an answer."

Zagan's subordinates were talented, but no sorcerer could answer his question. And honestly, it was questionable whether his sworn friend Chastille could provide him with an answer either. Richard straightened himself up, bracing himself as he nodded.

"So long as I can answer, I will," he said. Richard had some kind of business here, but showed a willingness to hear Zagan out first.

"Mmm... You see..." Zagan started, pulling a box from his pocket. It was small enough that he could hide it in his fist. After holding it

out, he spoke in so serious a tone that none had ever heard it before. "Do you happen to know when and how one should hand over a wedding ring?"

Zagan had heard from his mother-in-law Orias that this man was already serving as a perfect escort for Nephteros, so he seemed like the perfect person to ask.

The question really had come out of left field, but Richard smiled wryly as if he was already fully accustomed to this.

"Let's see... Personally, I believe I'd want to give one while swearing an eternal oath," he answered. "It's essentially proof of marriage, so if it is accepted, it would mean she consents to being wed."

"Wh-What?!" Zagan exclaimed as he arched back unintentionally, taking a serious blow to the heart. "I see... If I give it to her, then we'll already be married..."

"Oh, no. You're only officially married after having a wedding ceremony, but your personal feelings are another thing altogether."

"Hnnngh! I see... It seems I'll need to be mentally prepared... We both will."

Zagan obviously needed tremendous resolve to say it, but Nephy would also be struck with significant shock from being on the receiving end. On one hand, he wanted to shock her by keeping it a secret until the last moment. On the other, he couldn't shock her too much. He had to get Nephy to mentally prepare herself somehow.

At the very least, handing it over alongside her birthday present was out of the question. Zagan brushed back his bangs to calm down, then took a deep breath.

"You have my thanks," he said. "I doubt I would've gotten a satisfying answer from anyone else."

"That's not... Oh, um, don't worry about it."

He was just about to deny it, but then remembered the people who made up Zagan's social circle. Richard returned a considerate smile.

"You must be rewarded," Zagan said, regaining his composure. "If you so desire, I could contrive a way to extend your lifespan to at least match Nephteros's."

Richard's eyes shot open, apparently never having imagined such a suggestion.

"Umm, is it truly all right for you to so simply suggest such a thing?" he asked.

"I don't do it simply. I've already said that I approve of your relationship with Nephteros. That means I've accepted you as my little brother-in-law, so I need you to make Nephteros happy."

In terms of age, Richard was actually older, but in terms of

relations, that was how it worked out. Nephteros was Nephy's little sister, after all.

"Um, I thank you for the offer," Richard said, still clearly bewildered. "However, I'd like to discuss it with Nephteros a little more before coming to a decision."

"Hmm, a reasonable answer. You may come to me whenever you've made up your mind."

"Thank you very much," Richard replied, his expression hardening. "Though it may be presumptuous of me to ask, I've come here today to request something of you."

"Hmm, let's hear it."

Richard took in a short breath, then said in a clear voice, "As an Archdemon, would it be possible for you to destroy the Sacred Swords?"

Richard was capable of hearing Sacred Sword Camael's voice directly. He was the Sacred Swords' most beloved Angelic Knight right next to Head Archangel Ginias Gallahad II. Such a request sounded preposterous coming from such an Archangel, but Zagan nodded in understanding.

"It's said a seraph is sealed within each Sacred Sword, meaning you want to release them, correct?"

"I'd expect nothing less of you..." Richard said, lowering himself to a knee in supplication. "Over the past thousand years, those girls have been captives within the Sacred Swords, not even being granted the chance to pass on in peace. Among those who have wielded Sacred Swords, some committed massacres in the name of a just cause. The girls inside the swords remained unable to stop them, unable to look away, forced to watch the entire time. Is that not far too cruel?"

"Such thoughts suit you. However, say I can destroy the Sacred Swords. Will you be able to protect Nephteros?"

"I'll protect her. I have no intention of making her sad."

Zagan let out a sigh of admiration. The average man would likely have answered, "I'll stake my life on protecting her." If that was as far as his resolve went, then this wasn't even worth entertaining. After all, saying that would be equivalent to dying willfully and leaving Nephteros behind, which was the same as abandoning her. Instead, this man said that he wouldn't make Nephteros sad.

"And how exactly would you do that?" Zagan asked. "Without one of those damn swords, you'd be a simple human."

"There are swords with similar power to the Sacred Swords, like the one Lord Michael and Lady Oberon use. They don't rely on the same powers that Anointed Armor or Sacred Swords use. Also, I don't intend to be picky about the means I use to get stronger."

In other words, be it sorcery or anything else, he would make use of it. What's more, the Hex Blades used by the first-generation Archdemons during the battle with Shere Khan could also be substituted for the power of a Sacred Sword. This method was realistically possible.

If he's made up his mind to such an extent, I suppose there's no room for me to object.

If he had the tenacity to survive, even if it meant slurping mud for sustenance, Nephteros wouldn't be left alone. Seeing him like this, Nephteros was sure to support him. The two of them were definitely capable of overcoming almost any difficulties. If things were beyond them, Zagan and Nephth could lend a hand from the shadows too.

"Very well," Zagan said, nodding in understanding. "I'll assist with the destruction of the Sacred Swords."

"Th-Thank you very much!"

"It's too early to rejoice. It's no simple feat to destroy one, after all."

Zagan had already tested that they could be chipped, but had also confirmed that the blades automatically repaired themselves. It was unknown how much one had to be destroyed to erase the will of the seraph within, and if handled poorly, any attempts could just lead to unnecessary agony.

"It is no simple matter to shatter a Sacred Sword," a voice said, resounding through the throne room.

Zagan looked up toward where countless bats were flapping overhead. Before long, a slender arm reached out from the swarm of bats, followed by a creepy stuffed doll covered in stitches. A girl soon landed on the floor of the throne room with a tap of her heel, her eyes shining like a golden moon and her hair in pigtails. This was the vampire who'd lived for a thousand years, and Zagan's mother, Alshiera.

"It has been a long time, Lady Alshiera," Richard said, bowing respectfully once more. "I must thank you for the warning you gave me some time ago."

"Oh? Did I say something?" she asked.

"Yes. If not for that, I would have remained ignorant of Nephteros's circumstances and lost her."

He was likely referring to the time Nephteros's lifespan as a homunculus was drawing to an end. There was a bitter air to Richard's handsome smile.

Bifrons ended up butting in too. Mom really saved us.

Looking only at the results, everything had gone perfectly. Zagan had put in a lot of work treating Richard's gouged-out heart, though.

"Tee hee hee, I didn't do anything," Alshiera replied, smiling as if

she found his behavior strange. “You noticed on your own, then accomplished what you did of your own accord. Have more confidence in what you achieved.”

“Is that so? Then allow me to thank you of my own accord. Truly, thank you so very much.”

He didn’t let Alshiera toy with him at all and bowed to her reverently. In response, Alshiera gave him a relieved smile.

“So, mom, do you have something to say regarding the destruction of Sacred Swords?” Zagan said.

He didn’t know about this warning or advice or whatnot, but if she went out of her way to show her face at a time like this, she surely had something to tell them. And yet, Alshiera covered her face in bewilderment.

“What?” Zagan asked.

“Um...I’m still not used to you calling me that,” she said.

Her reaction was much like when Orias had just been introduced to Nephys. Zagan couldn’t help but sigh.

What’s she been doing these last thousand years...?

Zagan was blind to the fact that he’d fallen to a knee when Foll called him daddy. He simply looked at his mother in astonishment. Richard was off to the side with an amused look, implying they were both equally as bad. Noticing his gaze, Alshiera cleared her throat and got things back on track.

“Just once in the past, a Sacred Sword was destroyed.”

“Hmm...?”

Zagan had an idea as to what she was referring to, so he raised an eyebrow in interest.

That would be the thirteenth Sacred Sword, Azazel.

That had been in Kuroka’s report. Zagan had come to know of its existence after seeing it described in the journal he found in the hidden elven village. Thirteen names had been written in Celestian. After that, still lacking any positive proof, he’d discovered that the dark side of the church used the same name, making everything very ambiguous.

In all likelihood, that was Marchosias’s goal as the Pope.

Zagan had fallen for it perfectly, but during her battle with Asura and Bato, Kuroka had heard them clearly refer to Azazel as a sword.

“So tell me, what happened to the Sacred Sword?” Richard asked, listening attentively with a serious expression.

“Despite being so utterly eviscerated that it couldn’t maintain its form as a sword, the will sealed inside remained. I only realized this three hundred years later,” Alshiera replied, letting out a grief-stricken sigh. “How could it have been anything but agonizing? In the end, the only thing I was capable of was reshaping it into another form to

alleviate the pain.”

Zagan nodded in understanding.

And that would be the Three Holy Treasures of Liucaon. No wonder they reacted to Nephteros's celestial mysticism.

“You can't destroy them with your power?” Zagan asked.

Alshiera's bullets possessed the same power as Heaven's Phosphor. In her heyday, she could manipulate that power freely without having to rely on bullets at all.

“I wonder...” Alshiera mumbled, shaking her head. “Even if I could do that, it would mean destroying them down to the very last atom. That would reduce them to complete nihility, preventing them from rejoining the cycle of life and death.”

“But in the sense of ending their imprisonment inside those swords, you're saying it's possible,” Zagan said.

“I've never tried it, so all I can say is that the possibility exists.”

Regardless, if they sought the seraphs' salvation in death, this was an answer.

“What did Camael say?” Alshiera asked, turning to Richard.

“You're capable of speaking to her, yes?”

“Not much. She merely said she wanted me to wait until she saw a ‘certain something’ through with her own eyes.”

“A certain something?”

“She refused to elaborate, so I don't know any other details.”

That was quite a bothersome request. However, it seemed the seraph inside didn't oppose Richard's plan of destroying the Sacred Swords. Zagan didn't really care, but considering Alshiera's suffering these past thousand years, he could at least feel sympathy.

Still, it'd be a huge problem if Heaven's Phosphor didn't kill them completely.

There was a need to secure a more definitive means of accomplishing the feat. After thinking it over, a certain doubt came to mind.

If Nephy hears of this, she'll definitely try to save the seraphs within by any means possible... Zagan groaned at the thought.

“It might be beyond my abilities as her wielder,” Richard said, the resolution clear in his voice. “However, that doesn't mean saving her is impossible.”

That was why he was speaking his mind about it to Zagan. Those words gave Zagan the determination he needed.

“Very well. I'll ask Nephy about it,” he said.

“Huh?”

Both Richard and Alshiera were taken aback by his words.

“I'm pretty sure Lady Nephy will oppose this, though...” Alshiera replied.

“That’s why she’ll think up a way of saving them. All I’m capable of is destroying them,” Zagan said.

It wasn’t clear how much about this Nephteros knew, but she would surely do her best to save those souls.

“If you wish to end things peacefully, wouldn’t that be for the best?” Zagan asked, turning to Richard once more.

“I’m really no match for you...” Richard muttered, then bowed deeply, showing the utmost respect. “Please save Camael and her kind. If there’s anything at all that I can do to help, just tell me.”

“Hmph! Don’t worry about it. I owe you a debt for saving Nephteros. As such, it’s my turn to respond in kind.”

This was the man who would one day become his dear sister-in-law’s husband. If that man was treating him with such courtesy, Zagan couldn’t ignore it.

After thinking things through, a sudden thought came to mind.

A sister, huh...?

Zagan apparently had a little sister too. She’d died a thousand years ago from natural causes, but there was a girl who’d inherited her blood and had a striking resemblance to her. That girl had been given the same name as Zagan’s sister for his sake.

I wonder how she’s doing...

She hadn’t been informed of any of this, but Zagan couldn’t remain indifferent when it came to her.



“Kee hee hee, it’s been a long time, Earthshaker Vepar. Your love power is as impressive as always.”

A lone sorcerer stepped into the usual tavern in Kianoides. He had a delicate build and wore a flowing robe. His silky silver hair was tied with a ribbon, and he carried a staff longer than he was tall. He looked somewhere around twenty years old. There wasn’t much meaning to physical age for a sorcerer, but his graceful features were enough to make anyone’s head turn. His eyes remained closed at all times. He apparently wasn’t blind or anything. This was a ritual to elevate his mana by severing one of his senses, which worked out well considering his objective.

“Long time no see, Enchantress Gremory,” the sorcerer named Vepar replied, a clear look of annoyance in his bitter smile. “By the looks of it, you’re the same as ever even after entering Archdemon Zagan’s service.”

Greeted by his gentle and pleasant voice, Gremory unintentionally transformed from an old woman into a beautiful one.

“Oh?” Vepar remarked, tilting his head curiously. “Is he...? Is Kimaris not with you today?”

“There are newcomers in my liege’s camp. He’s stuck babysitting.”

Kimaris was Furcas’s watcher and guard, tasked with protecting him and his surroundings from afar. Due to that duty, Gremory was free to do as she pleased.

“Oh... How unfortunate,” Vepar replied, grimacing as if to emphasize how tiresome seeing her was.

Well, given Vepar’s looks, Gremory had naturally been giddy when they’d first met. At the time, he’d managed to get away from her when Kimaris held her back. At any rate, now that he was here, it was already too late. Vepar’s gem-adorned staff tapped against the ground as he took a seat across from Gremory in resignation. After ordering some wine and waiting for it, he clinked glasses with her.

“First, I suppose we should celebrate the recent victory of this town’s Archdemon, yes?” he said.

“You mean the battle with Shere Khan? News sure travels fast.”

“It was a major incident that even involved the Angelic Knights. What’s more, four Archdemons lost their seats. I’d know about it even if I didn’t want to.”

The battle between Zagan and Shere Khan was already known across the entire continent.

“I was especially surprised that Valefor became an Archdemon,” Vepar continued. “I figured the next Archdemon would’ve been either you or Barbatos. After all, she was the youngest and weakest among the candidates a year ago.”

Gremory’s brow twitched upon hearing that comment. Even after becoming an Archdemon, Foll was only known by her armored form. This was a natural outcome due to how overprotective Zagan was. And yet, Vepar had grasped not only her gender, but even her age. It seemed his closed eyes saw what couldn’t be seen by the naked eye.

“Well, I received a fair amount of power too,” Gremory replied with a laugh. “But Valefor’s potential love pow... I mean, strength, is far beyond mine.”

“You’re one to talk,” Vepar said, smiling as if he’d just heard a bad joke. “If you wielded your favorite scythe once more, I bet Archdemon Zagan would be within your reach, let alone Valefor.”

Despite being a sorcerer, Gremory always carried a large scythe around. The weapon had been gifted to her by her teacher, Orias. It had quite a history behind it. Despite this, Gremory looked wide-eyed back at Vepar.

“Kee hee, you sure do flatter me. The only thing you’ll get from me in return is love power, you know?”

“Well, I suppose that’s why Kimaris follows you around with such devotion.”

“What does Kimaris have to do with anything?”

Having spoken with more venom than he'd intended, Vepar covered his mouth and laughed it off. Someone walking by was so bewitched by the gesture that he bumped into a pillar looking at Vepar. In contrast to his graceful appearance, Vepar took a hardy gulp of wine and turned to Gremory, his eyes still shut.



“So? Did you call me out because you have some sort of business with me?” Vepar asked.

“Kee hee, what do you think?” Gremory replied, acting all self-important.

Vepar put a hand to his chin and sank into thought for a moment, then gave her a cheerful smile.

“For the time being, I suppose that, having grown wary after the battle with Shere Khan, Archdemon Zagan ordered you to get a grasp of what the other former Archdemon candidates are up to?”

That’s a former candidate for you...

Vepar had been keeping a closer eye on Zagan than the other way around.

“Kee hee hee... Correct,” Gremory answered happily. “That’s only half the reason, though.”

“Heh heh... There’s no way you’d be sent out for such a chore, after all.”

In truth, Zagan was wary of Vepar, but he had no further interest in him than that. At most, he’d told Gremory to “go and have a nice meal with him or something.”

“And what’s the other half?” Vepar asked.

“Oh, before that, tell me what you’ve been up to. Depending on your circumstances, my liege might treat you well, you know?”

“I believe my objective is exactly as you imagine,” Vepar answered, shrugging.

“Hmm. So you really are chasing Asmodeus, then?”

“Defeating my teacher is my lifelong desire, after all.”

There was a clear air of irritation in Vepar’s voice now.

“Asmodeus, huh?” Gremory said. “It seems she possesses some rather intense love power.”

Gremory had been away on business, so she hadn’t met Asmodeus directly. Regardless, she’d felt a strong stinging sensation on her skin from Asmodeus’s love power just by being in the town she’d recently inhabited. Gremory’s comrade Manuela had come in contact with her, and when she told Gremory about it, she’d been highly stimulated and had claimed Asmodeus to be utterly delicious.

What stunning love power from teacher and disciple alike! I want to taste them as a set!

Gremory somehow managed to hold back a nosebleed at the thought.

“I don’t mean to comment on your propensity to love all creation, but you should give it up,” Vepar said, scoffing as he poured himself another glass of wine. “Asmodeus is evil incarnate. Even sorcerers like me detest her.”

“Are you sure about that? You sound awfully proud of her...”

Vepar’s smile had something akin to respect behind it when he spoke of Asmodeus. He touched his own cheeks as if to confirm that fact.

“In terms of power, she’s undoubtedly the strongest Archdemon,” he spat out. “As a sorcerer, I pay respect to that one fact.”

“In terms of power, huh?” Gremory repeated with a groan.

What was required to be called the strongest? Was it just a matter of fighting and being stronger? However, even when one was weak, it was possible to defeat the strong using strategy. Victory in a battle between sorcerers was achieved by dragging one’s opponent into one’s own arena. That was how Glasya-Labolas had gotten the upper hand on Asmodeus—even if getting cut had been her intention. It was also how Andrealphus, who was supposedly the true strongest, had suffered a crushing defeat at Bifrons’s hands.

In that sense, Zagan was probably the strongest. When faced with Archdemons, he could seal their Sigils and devour all sorcery to drag his opponents into his own arena. It was close to impossible to defeat him as a sorcerer.

This wasn’t what Vepar meant, however. He spoke of raw power. Asmodeus was capable of causing a gravitational collapse. According to Foll, the strength of her sorcery rivaled Heaven’s Phosphor Starbreak, which meant it was on par with Alshiera’s god-killing power. In those terms, she even surpassed Zagan.

The power born from the tenacious desire to retrieve all of the carbuncles’ core jewels...

If her wish couldn’t be fulfilled, she was resolved to destroy the entire world. Such power was beyond the reach of even the other Archdemons. It was befitting of one who’d attained the title of strongest. Well, the truly terrifying part was that Foll had fought that same Archdemon to a draw. Still, a certain question came to mind.

Why did someone like that take a disciple?

Not only that, but she’d brought him up under her personal care and had even recommended him as an Archdemon candidate to inherit the Eldest’s sigil a year ago. Completely unrelated to Zagan’s order, Gremory’s mind was brimming with interest.

“Now that I think of it, I’ve never asked you,” she said. “What happened between you and your teacher?”

“My father was in possession of Spirit Blood,” Vepar answered, shrugging indifferently. “Is that enough of an answer?”

Gremory nodded in understanding. Asmodeus made an extreme example of all those in possession of her people’s core jewels. In other words, Vepar’s father had surely been killed in a most brutal manner.

“Well, he was a bum who could’ve died at any time, but even so,

he wasn't such scum that he deserved to die like that. My reason for learning sorcery is very simple—revenge.”

He probably wasn't lying, but there was a hint of longing in Vepar's voice.

“So then, how did you end up as Asmodeus's disciple?” Gremory asked.

“Well...I don't really know, honestly,” Vepar answered, looking up at the ceiling in a gesture of self-derision. “At the time, I was full of myself after learning some sorcery. I found Asmodeus and challenged her, but was easily defeated. I was prepared to die, yet she let me live for some reason. I was treated like a menial servant, but sometimes she taught me sorcery too... Hm? What's wrong?”

Gremory was covering her face. That story sounded far too familiar to her.

“It's nothing...” she answered. “I was just thinking about other sorcerers who did something similar.”

“Is that so...?”

There was once a witch who'd made a disciple of the ruffian who'd come to tear out her throat. This could be said of Gremory, who'd taken in Kimaris, and also of Dantalian, who'd loved Shere Khan.

I suppose this is the true nature of the love power I sense from him.

Why had Asmodeus taken Vepar in as a disciple? Gremory knew the answer to that question. She'd done the exact same thing, so she knew it even if she didn't want to.

I bet he made the same face Kimaris did back then.

Back when the leonin had bared his fangs at Gremory's neck, his eyes had looked extremely sorrowful. It was like he hated everything in the world, like he craved salvation more than any other, yet didn't know how to ask for it.

This had spurred an irrepressible urge in Gremory to protect him. After all, she'd gone through something similar in the past herself. What's more, Asmodeus's hair was silver, much like Vepar's. It was very likely she'd felt some kind of affinity toward him.

It seemed Vepar hadn't gotten to the same point as Kimaris or Shere Khan, but there were signs of his latent potential. That was why Gremory was convinced now.

If I slam his love power against Purgatory, it'll definitely turn into something fun!

When love power collided, the synergy caused it to swell and burst. The greater the love power, the more people would get involved in the blast. If she threw Vepar between Barbatos and Chastille, Gremory couldn't even predict how big the explosion would be. It was obviously going to be entertaining.

Perhaps having sensed her evil intent, Vepar arched back with a shudder. Much like Kuroka, his senses were sharp.

“Did I answer your questions well enough?” he said, trying to change the topic. “It’s about time you tell me what you want.”

“Oops, that’s right,” Gremory proclaimed. She then poured some wine into her glass and gulped it all down before cutting to the chase. “I believe you’re acquainted with Purgatory, yes?”

“I am. He’s a horrible person, but an extremely talented sorcerer. There’s nothing to lose from getting involved with him.”

“Kee hee, that makes things quick. He’s in a bit of trouble right now and needs help.”

“Hmm, a sorcerer of his caliber needs help?” Vepar said, knitting his brow curiously. “I don’t know if I can be of any assistance, but if that’s the case, I suppose I’ll hear you out.”

Vepar smiled, finding the idea of putting Barbatos in his debt most pleasant. Satisfied with that answer, Gremory, despite looking like a beautiful woman, smiled like a friendly old man.

“Kee hee, that’s good to hear. The request is simple. I want you to teach him how to go on a date.”

That suggestion, made with no ulterior motive behind it and backed by the utmost goodwill, had Vepar smiling as if she’d just told him the stupidest joke imaginable.

“Hah! Not even if you kill me,” he said.

“Huh? That bad?”

Gremory bent back in confusion. She hadn’t expected him to refuse so firmly. In a complete change from his usual cool and collected demeanor, cold sweat ran down Vepar’s brow.

“Didn’t you just say there was nothing to lose from getting involved with him?” Gremory asked.

“I also said he’s a horrible person, remember? We’re talking about him as a person here, not a sorcerer. An honest trade would be one thing, but a date involves *that* woman, right? Do you know how much of a pain he is when it comes to her?”

Vepar shook his head vigorously. Rather than physiological disgust, it was more like he sensed that he was in danger. His silver hair swayed in the air, and bewitched by this, someone sitting at the adjacent table spilled his beer all over himself.

“Oh, well, I know how tiresome he can get, but...is it truly that bad?” Gremory asked.

“It is. I won’t mince words. You shouldn’t butt in. At the very least, I definitely don’t want to get involved.”

Vepar was half on his feet, ready to run away at a moment’s notice. Seeing how he hadn’t shown any signs of being disagreeable when Gremory first brought Barbatos up, Vepar must have witnessed

something truly tiresome already. No, in all likelihood, he'd gotten dragged into something. Gremory wasn't one to back down so easily, however.

"Hmmm. Even if I force you, it seems I can't expect you to do a good job," she stated, putting a hand to her temple. "If that's the case, there's no helping it."

"Oh? You're backing down awfully fast."

"My liege has an interest in you. I can't afford to displease him."

With that, Vepar sighed in relief. He could tell that this granny obeyed Zagan's will. He didn't truly understand, however, that once Gremory's desires were unleashed, not even an Archdemon could control her.

"I had so much to say about Asmodeus's whereabouts and movements too..." Gremory added casually.

The air froze.

"Gremory..."

Hearing Vepar's cold voice, Gremory put a hand to her mouth as if she'd accidentally let those words slip.

"Oops! Oh my, how clumsy of me. Please forget that," she said.

Vepar grasped his staff so tight that it began creaking.

"You're such a...!"

"Hm? What is it, Vepar? If you have something to say, then say it," Gremory whispered sweetly.

"Let me...think it over," Vepar said, a hand to his temple as if directly holding back a headache.

"Oh, sure. You don't need to decide right away."

She figured he'd snap at the chance to get information on Asmodeus, but this matter was apparently bad enough to rival his greatest desire.

That man is the subject of far too much hate...

Well, Barbatos was the worst kind of sorcerer, the type people would think of immediately if asked to define an evil sorcerer. He was skilled, but few in his trade ever wanted to get involved with him.

After that, Gremory and Vepar ate and drank, talking intermittently about recent affairs. It was a very awkward meal.

Mrgh, Purgatory is more unpopular than I thought.

She'd had an idea that he was widely hated, but hadn't grasped the full scope of it. It was ever the mystery how Chastille had fallen for the man.

After settling the bill and leaving the tavern, Vepar suddenly ground to a halt.

"Gremory."

"What?"

"About your offer... I'll do it. After thinking it over, I've decided

that I want to get closer to my goal of defeating my teacher, even if only a little.”

He sounded like a stricken innocent virgin selling her body to pay off a debt.

“Did you brood over it that much...?”

In an unusual turn for Gremory, she inwardly apologized to Vepar.



“Eek! Someone! Someone save me!”

In a town far away from Kianoides, a scream resounded through the night sky. It was a desolate town in the middle of nowhere. The local church hadn’t been maintained, so the floor was coming apart. The signboards lining the shops were dirty, making it impossible to tell what they sold. That said, they’d lost the knowledge of how to farm the land, so the surrounding region was entirely barren.

In this remote town, a human-shaped “something” rose from the ground as if melting into the dark night. It swayed in the air as if it had no actual substance, its limbs continuously distorting as if their form was unstable. Despite this, when it swung its arms, the earth shook with a thud and the unlucky people in its way turned into red smears on the ground.

Upon taking a closer look, it might’ve been possible to discern that this shadowy figure was actually made up of little particles that resembled sand. Not that there was anybody here with the leisure to make that observation when faced with this unreasonable situation.

“Aaah! No! I don’t wanna die!” a young man screamed pathetically.

“W-Wait! Don’t leave me behind!”

The man ran away, abandoning the young woman who’d tripped when trying to follow him.

“I’ve had enough of this! Why do all the men who court me run away on their own?!”

The scene was somewhat familiar. The poor girl had gone through the same thing several weeks ago, and this time, the unreasonable monster’s arm came down and—

“Huh? Did we maybe meet last time too?”

The monster’s arm came to an unnatural stop as if stitched into space itself. A girl with beautiful silver hair stood in front of the woman who’d nearly been killed. She looked to be around fifteen or sixteen. Her features retained a childish air to them. She had a pitch-black robe over her shoulders, and a silver pendant hung over her chest. A star-shaped symbol highlighted her violet pupils. This was the lowliest and most despicable Archdemon—Collector Asmodeus.

Probably realizing who it was, the poor girl who'd just been saved averted her eyes, cold sweat pouring down her brow.

"Y-You must be mistaken..."

"Well, I'm not heartless. If you give me all your money again, I'll save you. Isn't that great?"

"Y-Yay... I'm so...happy," the poor girl cheered, her eyes like those of a dead fish.

Anyway, demons sure have been manifesting at an abnormal rate.

This monster was called a demon. In the few weeks since the poor girl had last gotten caught up in a similar incident, enough demons had manifested to reach double digits. For whatever reason, they were appearing at an accelerated rate.

If this keeps up, it'll get even crazier than five years ago.

Back then, behind the scenes during Shere Khan's rare species hunt, massive numbers of demons had manifested. Well, to be accurate, Shere Khan had used the chaos caused by the demons to begin his rare species hunt. The existence of demons was shrouded from the world, so Shere Khan's activities had simply taken center stage.

In any case, many demons had manifested every month five years ago, and the Archdemons had been sent out to deal with them. In the end, Liucaon's vampire, Alshiera, had settled things by resealing the demons, but it'd taken nearly an entire year to resolve the matter.

But this time, our little Alshiera hasn't shown any signs of taking action.

Her focus was likely directed at the barrier keeping the demons sealed. That made sense, considering she was in charge of the thing, but that meant she was likely unable to observe abnormalities happening on the outside. In that case, it meant the barrier itself was operating normally. In other words, this was different from five years ago. And yet, Marchosias took haphazard measures against them, simply sending Asmodeus out each time demons appeared—predicting where they were beforehand using Astrologian's fortune telling, at least.

None of the Archdemons were dealing with the source of the demons itself. On the contrary, it was possible none even had a grasp of what that source was. At the very least, Asmodeus had no idea, which was a huge problem.

Either way, if this went on for a few more months, several demons would be appearing every single day. No matter how powerful Asmodeus was, she couldn't cover the entire continent on her own. She didn't know how reliable the Archdemons who'd cycled in over the centuries were. Archdemons were as far from submissive as they came. Even if a request was made to all of them to deal with the issue,

it was questionable how many would heed the call. The one making the request was supposed to be dead to begin with. Seeing as only three Archdemons had answered his call, including Asmodeus, not much could be expected of the rest.

If they didn't find the root cause behind all this, they'd eventually be overcome by sheer numbers. Asmodeus was sure that the "self-proclaimed" Marchosias was well aware of that fact, but she couldn't deny the possibility that the abnormality with the demons was part of his schemes. If someone had to deal with it, it was her.

Asmodeus didn't have a bottomless font of power. If the fighting went on, she would exhaust her mana, catalysts, and tools, which she couldn't allow to happen. To that end, she wouldn't even mind if that homicidal maniac Glasya-Labolas was sent out to help with this job.

Well, that's what makes this a penalty.

Asmodeus had failed Marchosias's command to steal the staff called Mercurius. He'd probably realized that she was playing dumb about its current whereabouts too. As such, she'd been sent out pretty much every single day to hunt demons.

Speaking of hiding things, the same goes for sis's eyes too.

Asmodeus had retrieved her sister's core jewel, but her sister's gouged-out eyeballs remained unaccounted for. She at least had a vague idea of who had them, though.

But I can't find any openings... If she wished to get them back, she had no choice but to obey Marchosias.

"Grr..."

After sinking into thought for quite some time, Asmodeus noticed that the human-shaped shadow was groaning about something.

"Oh, sorry. I'll put you at ease right away."

She'd carelessly forgotten to finish it off. Asmodeus snapped her fingers, and the demon's body was crushed as if flattened from the inside out. A demon was a calamity that required several sorcerers at the level of former Archdemon candidates to work together to defeat, or for several of the Archangels to band together. Even among the Archdemons, only a few could massacre one so easily.

Asmodeus swept back her silver hair, then faced the pitiful girl who was on the ground trying to play dead.

"Now then, time to pay up," Asmodeus said.

"That's everything..."

The girl held out a small leather pouch, prostrating herself on the ground. Inside was no more than five gold coins and a couple dozen silver ones.

"Oh, come on, your life is worth less than half of last time," Asmodeus said. "With such a meager reward, nobody's going to bother saving you next time, you know?"

“It hasn’t even been a month since you took all my money, remember?”

“Wow. It hasn’t even been a month and you were attacked by another demon? Are you cursed? You wanna step back from me a little?”

Asmodeus reeled back from the girl. This had taken it a step too far, prompting the girl to finally break into tears.

“Waaah! What did I do to deserve this?!”

“Ahah, misfortune doesn’t need a reason for anything.”

“Huh? Why does that sound strangely convincing coming from you...?”

“Ahah, that’s a secret.”

Having sensed something behind Asmodeus’s smile, the girl shrank back and shuddered. As she did, a bundle of papers flew out of her pocket.

“What’s this?” Asmodeus said.

“Oh, that’s—”

Asmodeus picked one up. It was a tabloid with large illustrations printed on cheap paper.

“Let’s see... ‘Grotesque monsters appearing in all regions. A mysterious girl chases them. Investigator Rebecca Appelmann risks her life following her trail...’ Huh? Is this about me?”

The tabloid had a drawing of a cheap-looking monster and a girl confronting it. Judging by how the girl was dressed like a sorcerer, it seemed this was a depiction of Asmodeus. The article was exaggerated and seemed like it would be popular with the masses, but it wasn’t entirely made up either. However, this wasn’t a major city. There were few literate people out here in the boonies. Tabloids were sold by reporters and people paid them for it. What’s more, every piece of paper had the same article printed on it.

In that case, this girl was likely some kind of reporter. After Asmodeus read from it aloud, the girl averted her eyes with tremendous vigor. Countless individuals had the chance to see Asmodeus, but the illustration depicted far too many of the finer details. Even her silver pendant was included. In that case, it had to have come from someone who’d been close enough to see her face—just like the girl on the ground before her now.

“Ahah, are you this Appelmann, then?” Asmodeus said. “Can you draw me a little cuter? Is it too late to do a reprint?”

“Ummm...you’re not angry?”

“I’m *super* angry. My beauty looks so half-assed like this.”



Asmodeus flicked the paper, and the girl—Rebecca Appelman—rubbed her hands together, her eyes darting about in confusion.

“Aaah, well, next time I’ll portray you as boundlessly sweet and beautiful, so please show me mercy...” Rebecca said.

“Please do.”

“Umm, little miss sorcerer, it seems like you’ve mellowed out some...” Rebecca commented, looking somewhat bewildered.

“Little...?”

She had no way of knowing that Asmodeus was an Archdemon who was well over twice her age. Having interpreted Asmodeus’s dubious gaze as dangerous, Rebecca tried to gloss over everything in a fluster.

“No, no, no! I didn’t mean any offense! I mean, compared to last time, you seem...a lot kinder.”

Faced with this compliment, Asmodeus replied with her usual fake smile.

“Ahah, haven’t I always been kind?”

“Ha ha ha...ha...”

“Anyway, nobody out here can read, right? What’re you doing selling tabloids? You don’t need that many if you’re just reading them aloud.”

“Oh, there’s going to be some big news coming in the near future, so I’m laying the groundwork...”

“Big news?”

Asmodeus didn’t believe there was much bigger news than demons appearing, but the general populace wasn’t really familiar with them. Those who knew nothing of demons wouldn’t even be able to imagine what they were with a simple description, so it wasn’t worth their attention.

Asmodeus cocked her head, and Rebecca covered her mouth in a panic.

“U-Um, the information’s coming from the head office, so I don’t really know the details...”

“Hmm. And where is this head office?” Asmodeus asked.

“K-Kianoides.”

Asmodeus’s brow arched.

That’s Foll’s town.

It was also Marchosias’s old haunt and he was plotting something there too. Foll’s domain was the capital of the oppressed, so it was unlikely for her to come to any harm, but seeing as she often visited Archdemon Palace, she wasn’t entirely unrelated either.

Well, it’s not for me to worry about, but...

“B-By the way,” Rebecca said, rubbing her hands together and

trying to change the subject. "Can you tell me your name? I mean, it's easier for the readers to picture a beautiful girl with a name, right?"

Despite being knocked down, she wasn't going to let this end. It was like she was demanding an apology for being robbed of all her money. She had quite the commercial spirit, if nothing else. Asmodeus didn't hate that.

Not that I have any obligation to tell her my real name.

Asmodeus was about to give a name at random...when suddenly, a certain little girl came to mind.

"Come back whenever you want. I'll be waiting."

No matter how much Asmodeus tormented her, that little girl hadn't yielded. She'd remained obstinate to the very end. Asmodeus sank into thought for a while, fidgeting with the pendant at her chest.

"Then please call me Lily."

She didn't know why she spoke that name after all this time. Foll was a child, but still an Archdemon. What's more, she was with Zagan. It was very unlikely for her to come across such a vulgar tabloid. Nevertheless, that was the name that'd rushed out of Asmodeus's mouth.

Well, it's not like I can announce myself as an Archdemon all the way out here.

Asmodeus was an Archdemon with enemies all over the world. If her whereabouts were revealed, there were plenty of idiots who would come out to try to kill her in her sleep. Those who conspired with each other upon finding out they shared the same objective were nothing to Asmodeus, but they were still annoying. That was how she convinced herself of her choice of name, at least.

"Hmm," Rebecca sighed in admiration. "What a pretty name."

"Thanks."

It felt unexpectedly nice to be complimented. Asmodeus tried to hide this by brushing back her silver hair.

"Okay then, Lily," Rebecca continued, pulling out a notebook and giving her pen a lick. "Why were you fighting that monster...? A demon, was it?"

"Ahah, for love and peace. Don't you think that sounds great?"

"Amazing! This is my first time hearing that said with such little feeling."

"You really have quite the personality, huh?" Despite being somewhat astonished, Asmodeus liked her enough to keep up the conversation. "Well, to put it bluntly, my employer told me to. Things'll get pretty bad if we leave them be, so he ordered me to go deal with them."

"Meaning you get paid a ton for it? Wait, then why do you need to rob me blind...?"

“Because I suffer from a chronic disease where I feel unbearable pain whenever I work for free!”

Sensing she was in danger, Rebecca turned pale and put on an insincere smile.

“It’s important to be paid appropriately! Thank you for the valuable lesson!” she exclaimed.

Asmodeus cast her gaze downward while returning a chilling smile.

That said, it’s pretty scary that I’m being compensated despite this being a penalty.

She was, in fact, being made to travel all over the continent to deal with demons. Marchosias was at least rewarding her appropriately for her effort. Asmodeus was being paid in Spirit Blood. Rather, that was the only reward she would ever work for.

There are less than a hundred left in the world.

Three hundred and fifty years had passed since Asmodeus became an Archdemon. It had been nearly four hundred years since she’d become a sorcerer. Over those centuries, she’d gone around reclaiming Spirit Blood from all over the continent. Now that the carbuncles were extinct, the total number out there was fixed.

At the same time, by investigating the villages that’d been destroyed, she’d estimated how many were probably left. In total, they numbered around ten thousand. She’d collected almost all of them, even those that’d been processed and used as decorations. However, she hadn’t been able to locate the last core jewels for a long time. Marchosias apparently knew exactly where they were. In exchange for dealing with the demons, he presented her with the information he had. In other words, Marchosias had been keeping the remaining Spirit Blood hidden from her.

Some had been hidden in the mouth of a volcano, or a monster’s nest—places that no normal sorcerer could approach. However, an Archdemon at Marchosias’s level—even if it’d be annoying—could easily have collected them.

Meaning he prepared them centuries ago to get me to do what he wants.

And yet, she didn’t believe it would end with him kindly offering them to her for her work. She hadn’t been informed of Marchosias’s ultimate objective, but at this rate, a collision with Archdemon Zagan was inevitable.

In spite of this, even Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas hadn’t been a match for Zagan in a head-on confrontation. The slit-eyed man—Bato, if she remembered correctly—also had hidden intentions. It was clear as day that Asmodeus would betray Marchosias the moment there was nothing left to pay her with too. Pretty much the only one who had

any intention of obeying Marchosias was Astrologian Eligor. Marchosias clearly didn't have enough pawns, so the fact that he was using a limited resource to pay Asmodeus to do such frivolous work meant...

He's definitely gonna dispose of me the second I'm done collecting all the Spirit Blood.

Using all ten thousand gems, any manner of extravagant sorcery could be invoked. It might even be possible to create a magic weapon that surpassed the powers of an Archdemon. For example, Mystic Artisan Naberius would gladly leap at the opportunity. According to Asmodeus's intuition, the two of them already had some kind of secret agreement.

Asmodeus did, of course, consider betrayal to be the natural course of events for a sorcerer. She was the Collector, so she'd long resolved herself to the idea of all twelve other Archdemons working together to kill her. She'd even prepared to massacre all of them when the time came.

It was nice and easy to discipline those who relied on power. It was just a matter of forcing them to yield and shutting them up with an even greater show of force. That was no different when faced with an Archdemon. This wasn't a matter of conceit or overconfidence. It was an absolute fact that Asmodeus possessed the means to bring any enemy she faced to their knees.

Not that any Archdemons would be that stupid.

The world of sorcery wasn't so simple that possessing monstrous power was enough to stand at its summit. If they were going to deal with her, they'd obviously do so under the assumption that Asmodeus would resort to playing her trump card. If their countermeasures surpassed Asmodeus's expectations, the most she'd be capable of was dragging everyone down with her.

Not that I really care, but..

And yet, she felt like there was a place for her to return to now. After racking her brain, thinking it was about time to find a way to run away from her predicament, Asmodeus suddenly turned to Rebecca.

"Oh, by the way, miss reporter?"

"What is it?"

"Can you step back a little? Twenty meters back, to be precise," Asmodeus said, practically telling her to just get the hell out of her sight.



"There's no need to be that mean, is there?"

Rebecca complained about the unjust treatment, but Asmodeus

wasn't listening.

Working overtime goes against my policy!

She grabbed Rebecca by the nape of the neck and hurled her into the air without giving her any time to react.

"Eeeeeek! What was that fooo—?"

Turning her back to the distant scream, Asmodeus raised a hand to the sky.

"Blackest Black Haze."

This time, she didn't unleash a small black sphere. Sure, one of those was a part of the core of her sorcery, but multiple spheres overlapped to create one large ball. It was a bundle of gravity that could crush anything and everything in its path. The thing was a haze only in name, and the cluster of destruction shot into the sky like a bullet, sucking everything in its surroundings toward it.

This was an application of Blackest Black that was optimized for combat use, amplifying its speed and scale. About the only person capable of blocking this at first sight was Sorcerer Slayer Zagan, who could absorb sorcery on reflex.

The Haze went up into the sky and engulfed "something," but an instant later, the ball of gravity was repulsed with a sound like pinging glass.

"—ooooooooor...? Huh?"

Asmodeus caught the pitiful flying reporter with her slender arm. A beat later, the surrounding buildings started crumbling to pieces. She'd held back compared to using Hades, but Asmodeus's sorcery mercilessly crushed everything around her. She'd only just destroyed an entire town the other day, so she had to be more careful.

"Hmm, looks like something on a slightly different level has come out this time," Asmodeus murmured, a smile on her lips.

"Huh? What?"

Faced with the strange phenomenon of being caught by the person who'd thrown her, the reporter could do nothing but raise her voice in bewilderment.

Asmodeus's starry purple eyes reflected a figure floating in the night sky. It wore a robe akin to a sorcerer's, had a fairly large body, was taller than the average adult male, and had a sturdy build. However, it wore a hood deep over its eyes, so its face couldn't be seen.

Still, even though its face remained hidden, it clearly wasn't human. As its long robes blew in the wind, an immaterial black shadow could be seen beneath along with a strange pattern made up of circles of lines. In a sense, the black shadow was similar to the earlier demon, but its very being was far denser. To put it simply, if the earlier demon was gas, then this one was the same thing

condensed into a solid state while occupying the same amount of space.

A demon, and what's more...

The new demon hadn't repelled Blackest Black Haze through sheer force. Instead, it'd dispersed the sorcery by destroying the very core of it, which meant the demon possessed the wisdom to discern that was possible and had the skill to execute it. In a complete change from her usual superficial smile, Asmodeus donned a chilly grin.

"This is my first time meeting an intelligent demon."

It was easy to tell just by the fact that it was wearing clothes, but this demon was clearly capable of intellectual thought. It was fundamentally different from the other rabble who merely swung their limbs around aimlessly.

The question is how smart it is, exactly.

Animals like dogs, wolves, and hawks were highly skilled hunters. The demon's ability to fend off Blackest Black could have simply been an extension of that. However, if that wasn't the case—if it possessed enough intellect to hold a proper conversation—would Asmodeus's power even be able to reach it?

If it's intelligent, it may even be able to use sorcery.

The reason dragons were extolled as the strongest was not only because of their tough bodies and massive capacity for mana—which was far beyond any human's limits—but because they wielded sophisticated sorcery beyond human means as well. An Archdemon had to be dispatched just to deal with the mindless demons who manifested and did nothing but flail around violently, so if a demon possessed beyond-average intelligence, could humanity do anything about it?

"Miss reporter," Asmodeus said, placing Rebecca on her feet and keeping her eyes on the demon. "You'd better run as far away as you can. This town's probably gonna vanish like the last one."

"Eep—!"

If she didn't understand what that implied, she wouldn't have survived to this day. Rebecca gulped, then ran off like a startled hare. Due to the earlier demon's rampage, Asmodeus couldn't sense anybody in the surrounding area. Confirming that the reporter was rushing off into the distance, Asmodeus smiled bitterly.

"I don't get it, Lily. Will that make you happy?"

Ever since their last meeting, for some reason, that little girl's words had pricked at her heart like a thorn. It didn't matter to Asmodeus if this rural town vanished or if Rebecca got caught up in things. And yet, she'd gone out of her way to save the reporter from getting caught in Haze and had even gone as far as letting her get away from here. She couldn't even expect any revenue from such a

pauper, so why had she gone to such lengths?

“Hey there, mister demon, can you understand me? You look awfully strong. You shouldn’t be raising your hand against such an innocent little girl, you know? Girls are far more precious than any jewel.”

If it did understand her, her behavior would agitate it, but if it reacted, it would be proof that it understood. Asmodeus closed one eye and thrust out a finger, observing her opponent’s reaction carefully. As for the robed demon...

“The Archdemon’s right leg—a fragment of our king,” it said in an unexpectedly well-projected voice.

It understands. It knows sorcery. This is bad.

Asmodeus narrowed her eyes. Seeing that it said “Archdemon,” it definitely knew sorcery. It wasn’t a problem that the demon could use sorcery in and of itself, but it was a problem because Asmodeus wasn’t sure she would be able to handle it. What’s more, by saying “our king,” the demon implied there was something even stronger than it...and that there were likely several others at its level.

Those who resorted to using power to get their way would yield to an even greater show of force. Asmodeus was no exception to that logic. However, this could also be considered a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

This guy might know the reason why so many demons are manifesting.

She knew Marchosias was probably setting her up, so she didn’t want to exhaust all her strength here. She wanted to get this whole conflict with the demons done as soon as possible.

“If you understand me, then how about chatting a little?” she asked, putting a finger to her lips and tilting her head like a little bird. “I don’t even know what’s going on. It’s a lot of trouble exterminating demons all the time.”

Eligor’s sure to be monitoring this little exchange.

Asmodeus’s current situation didn’t permit her to negotiate out in the open.

Now then, as for how the demon responded...

“You’re somewhat too dangerous,” it replied, bloodlust evident in its voice.

“Oh my, how unfortunate.”

To a demon, she was an enemy who’d slaughtered its kind. So long as it had no interest in any information she possessed, there was no room for negotiation.

It’s far too much of a mystery, so I have to be careful. Guess I’ll get a little serious.

Left with no other choice, Asmodeus snapped her fingers.

“Black Needle Tree Castle.”

At her call, needles made of black shadows thrust up beneath the demon. This sorcery was similar to the trump card Barbatos had once used against a certain “monster.”

The demon nimbly dodged the countless needles bursting out in every direction, but that wasn't all there was to Asmodeus's sorcery, as even more thorns sprouted from each individual needle. The needles had already spread out to surround the demon, and now each had countless thorns of their own. Each of these thorns also sprouted an equal number of thorns, warping and spreading out like tree branches. It truly was like a castle made of a tree. Faced with thrusting needles from every direction, the demon had no way of surviving...or at least, it wasn't supposed to.

“I guess this level of sorcery has no effect even if I land a direct hit...”

The Black Needle that struck home shattered on impact. In other words, even sorcery crafted by a former Archdemon candidate had no way of hurting this demon.

It hardened the surface of its body...meaning it can probably also use martial arts.

However, in that case, a certain question came to mind.

Why did it dodge an attack it had no need to dodge?

Had it failed to perceive Black Needle's power at first? Or did that mean it still felt pain even if it could block the attack?

Hmm, no, that's probably wrong.

Understanding the true meaning behind the action, Asmodeus decided on her next move. She had another robe over her shoulders now. She'd used the short time afforded to her by Black Needle Tree Castle to pull it out of her treasury. It was far too dark to call black. It was as if it erased light, or as if nothingness had been shaped into a robe. Asmodeus specialized in pure firepower, even among all the Archdemons, but her second name didn't come from her roles as a destroyer or an avenger. So then, why was she the Collector?

“Tartaros.”

This wasn't sorcery. It was the effect of one of the many relics stored in Asmodeus's treasury. Her second robe began spreading out on its own as if it possessed a will of its own. It looked like it was trying to tear itself apart, but it never ripped and instead spread over its surroundings. Everything it touched was annihilated with a ripping shred. Not only were solid objects destroyed, but even the air itself turned into an empty void.

“This is a specially made robe woven of a bug called a zone eater. Sorcery was used to transform them into thread. Even a demon will probably die if it comes into contact with it, so do try to be careful.”

A zone eater was a creature that served as a cleansing agent in

subspace. They looked like giant caterpillars and ate holes in space itself, sometimes showing up in the real world as a result. The current age of humanity probably possessed no way of defending against even one of them...and this insane robe was woven out of tens of thousands of the terrifying creatures. It was known as the Void Curtain, and it was a taboo magic item that had been created by a certain Archdemon. Its mere existence threatened to engulf the entire world and destroy it, so five hundred years ago, it'd been sealed away where nobody could reach it. However, to the Collector, Tartaros was little more than one of her many treasures.

Asmodeus's treasury had everything from the relics of the gods who walked the earth a thousand years ago to the cursed tools that'd been banned for their blasphemy. She was more than just a walking powder keg. She was like a walking inventory for a heretical museum and was hence known as the Collector.

When she got serious, it meant opening the doors to her treasury. This was why she was confident that when it came to a struggle of power, she could make the thirteen Archdemons bow before her. Simply challenging her in a contest of strength meant stepping into her arena.

It seems Foll realized that halfway through...

The little girl had hung in there to the very end regardless, so Asmodeus felt honest respect for her.

Thus, in the blink of an eye, the dreadful weave enveloped everything around the demon.

"How dare you create such a sinful thing," the demon said, turning its hand into a blade.

Sorcery... No, it's transforming a part of its own body.

The demon had hardened itself to withstand a direct blow from Black Needle. If that same material was shaped into a blade, it would surely be the ultimate sword.

The demon slashed at the cloth, but didn't manage to cut it. On the contrary, its blade began crumbling to pieces. Still, the fact that it hadn't been annihilated upon coming into contact with Tartaros was worthy of great admiration.

The demon's blade couldn't cut Tartaros, but it was capable of pushing it aside. It then used the momentum to take a swing at Asmodeus, but the blade came to a stop without reaching her. The cloth had spread in front of her like a shield to block a sword. That only made sense, since the Void Curtain's original purpose was to serve as armor.

Not that I pulled it out here to protect myself.

Asmodeus had used the time it took for the demon to reach her to complete her sorcery.

“Hades White Night.”

“Guh...?”

The demon came to a complete stop. No, it was moving, but was no longer able to advance. It was as if it'd been sewn into place.

“Oh, good. Looks like gravity affects you, at least.”

Asmodeus smiled in relief, as that was rather valuable information. The particles known as gravitons could even distort light and space. As a matter of fact, nothing in existence was supposed to be free of their effects, but demons tended to ignore physical laws, so she wouldn't have been surprised if they didn't fall under their influence. However, if gravity worked on a demon, that meant it had no way of stopping Asmodeus's sorcery.

Moons hung in the sky overhead. One was a half moon, while the other was a pure-white full moon. In every single spot the moonlight shone down on, everything floated up as if gravity had been cut off. The crumbling houses, the stone pavement, and flower petals from deeply rooted plants scattered into the air. It was as if gravity in the area had been reversed.

Now released from the confines of gravity, the demon floated up into the sky.

“Tch!”

The demon clicked its lips sharply and swung its blade, but that too floated up into the sky, losing its momentum, no longer able to reach Asmodeus.

Gravity's not the only thing that's been severed here. The flow of power itself has also been cut off.

Hades White Night was sorcery that brought all physical phenomena to a halt. Be it a sword or lightning, everything lost its strength after traveling a mere few centimeters. The only thing capable of moving freely in that zone was Tartaros, which could destroy everything it touched.

The demon floated in the air, unable to do anything, yet Asmodeus simply observed it calmly.

“Hmm, so you can click your lips? But by the looks of it, you don't even have a mouth, which means...”

Her muttering didn't reach the demon. However, be it by reading her lips or some other means, the thing gave the impression that it understood what she was saying. Asmodeus confirmed this as she continued her observation.

A light floated inside the demon's hood like an eye, but it wasn't positioned where a human eye would have been. It also had no visible mouth. She couldn't spot anything like a tongue that would be required to make that clicking noise. And yet, it had. Asmodeus put a finger to her lips and grinned bewitchingly.

“Could it be that you were all originally human?”

It had no mouth, so it was questionable how it even spoke, and yet it had clicked its lips. In other words, maybe that was a habit that came from its past.

The demon fell silent and stared at Asmodeus. It was questionable whether it was aware that it was doing this. Well, staring in a figurative sense, of course. It wasn't clear where its eyes were either.

“Ha ha ha, bingo?” Asmodeus said.

“You talk too much.”

She could hear no sounds and see no mouth, but she sensed the demon whisper those words. Immediately following that, its body swelled up.

“What?”

An instant later, the demon tore through its robes and countless tentacles flung out. They were slow enough for Tartaros to stop, but with so many of them, it was a major threat. The cursed cloth caught the tentacles' blows, but failed to annihilate them. The tentacles didn't go unscathed, but they had apparently been enhanced much like its blade to withstand Tartaros's touch to a certain extent.

It can move that well under White Night's effect?

Asmodeus kicked off the ground and fluttered into the air. If they were moving that well, then each tentacle was swinging with enough force to shatter a mountain. It was an astounding power that was far too much for even an Archdemon to handle. The tentacles were well into the double digits, and every single one hounded Asmodeus.

It would have been tremendously difficult even for Tartaros to destroy them all. Thus, Asmodeus clasped her hands together before her chest as if holding a bouquet. She then reached out with both hands and a black flower bloomed from her palms. If not for the white moonlight, its contour was impossible to distinguish. After all, the flower was the color of...nothingness.

“Last Blossom of the Lonely Moon of Hades.”

Petals scattered from the black flower. However, no matter how many petals flew about, the number of petals on the flower itself remained fixed. Before long, the fluttering petals were like a storm of falling blossoms that coiled around the demon's tentacles.

“Gyaaaah!”

The demon screamed in agony for the very first time. Little wonder, as everywhere the black petals touched, its flesh was annihilated as if scooped out with a spoon. The tentacles rapidly vanished. Left unable to do anything but scream, the demon was engulfed by Tartaros. After a few seconds, nothing remained.

It was an overwhelming victory. It'd probably been a powerful demon, the likes of which had never been seen before, but it hadn't

been able to inflict a single wound on Asmodeus. Despite this, her expression remained gloomy.

Weird. It was too weak.

Not even any of the other Archdemons could have survived such a fierce attack, but Asmodeus felt like it shouldn't have been enough to win. That was exactly why she'd displayed this much of her power. There was no point if it really defeated the demon. As if to answer her bewilderment, she heard the demon's voice coming from inside Tartaros.

"How terrifying," it said. "Are there multiple beings like you in the world now?"

Yes, the voice was coming from *inside* Tartaros—where everything was supposed to be annihilated. Inside the nothingness-colored cloth, the same pattern that had been on the demon's face surfaced.

It's actually encroaching on Tartaros!

Asmodeus raised her guard, but it was far too late...and the demon was far too close.

"Agh!"

An arm thrust out of Tartaros and grabbed her by the neck, and then...

"_____"

She heard its voice as if it was whispering directly into her ear.

No, that's not quite right. It's talking by shaking the air...?

The hand grasping Asmodeus's neck was trembling slightly. That shook the air, forming a voice only Asmodeus could hear.

"_____"

She somehow managed to grab the hand back and used the same technique to reply to it. This lasted only a few seconds before the demon threw Asmodeus to the ground.

"Gah!"

Asmodeus gasped for air as if in intense pain, then undid White Night. Released from its grip, the demon started vanishing as if melting away into the darkness. It appeared to be running away.

"Hak... Wait... Do you...have a name?" Asmodeus asked, surprised by her own question.

"...Samyaza."

With that, the demon vanished completely into the night.

"Ugh, sorry, Tartaros. I finally brought you out, but couldn't put you to good use. I'll practice so that I can use you even better next time."

Tears pooled in the corner of Asmodeus's star-accented eyes as she gingerly stroked the dreadful cloth. The demon encroaching on Tartaros was unthinkable. The only thing a sorcerer could really believe in to the very end was their own sorcery, but the failure to

bring out a tool's true worth was also the wielder's responsibility.

Asmodeus's goal was to gather all Spirit Blood, but that didn't mean she ignored the other treasures she gained as the Collector. She gave every single one daily maintenance, and there wasn't a single speck of dust in her treasury. Sure, Asmodeus had massacred all previous owners of Spirit Blood, but one reason for that had been that none of them had properly tended to the gems, so she treated everything she owned with due respect.

In any case, she looked up at the sky where the demon had vanished.

It was unexpectedly a bit of a gentleman...

It'd whispered to Asmodeus in a way that only she could hear. The demon Samyaza had properly received Asmodeus's message. In response, it'd avoided the Black Needle that it hadn't needed to dodge—it'd put up a fake fight.

Inside White Night, all sound and light had come to a stop. That, of course, also applied to sorcery. In other words, Eligor couldn't have observed what'd happened inside. Asmodeus had quietly taken that last attack because she'd known that.

In short, its wisdom rivals an Archdemon... I really don't wanna make an enemy of them.

Asmodeus rubbed her neck and groaned.

"Does Alshiera know about this?"

Something extremely bad seemed to be beginning. It was still unclear whether that demon, Samyaza, would be an enemy or lend her a hand. However, some unknown force was at work.

"I wonder if I can still catch that reporter."

With that, it was clear that even more misfortune was about to befall Rebecca Appelman.

Chapter II: They Say Life Comes with Three Popular Seasons

“—That sums it up. I want to do something about the seraphs inside the Sacred Swords.”

The next day, in Archdemon Palace, much like the previous day, Zagan, Richard, and Alshiera were in the throne room. With them were the three high elves, Orias—who’d retired from being an Archdemon—Nephy, and Nephteros. Also present was the man who’d personally fought against seraphs a thousand years ago, Asura. Due to the scale of what was being discussed, a heavy silence fell over the room. Even Zagan’s expression was stiff, and he found himself unable to hide his tension.

What do I do? It looks like a family meeting with these people. It’s got me nervous...

It felt odd not having Foll here if this was a family meeting, but these were basically all relatives, and excluding Orias, all of them were couples. What’s more, Barbatos wasn’t there for Zagan to use as a punching bag. This was a rare situation. Suddenly, the ring came to Zagan’s mind.

No, this isn’t the time to be handing over a wedding ring...I think.

That would be rushing it. Besides, if he was going to give it to Nephy in front of her family, Foll would have to be here too. As such, now wasn’t the time. That was when a sudden realization struck him. Thinking back on it, everyone knew that Nephteros and Richard were now a couple, but they might not have been properly introduced yet. Asura especially was a known face, but many didn’t know who exactly he was. In that sense, this gathering had a significant purpose to accomplish. Thus, Zagan cleared his throat to break the silence.

“Come to think of it, we should start with introductions. First, I’m sure everyone has heard that Alshiera is my mom. Asura here is looking after her. He’s a hero from a thousand years ago. I’m certain there are many things in this age he hasn’t grown accustomed to, so give him a hand if you can.”

“Mph!”

Alshiera made a weird noise and covered her face, but Zagan ignored her. Orias was there to stroke her back, so it was probably fine to leave her be. In contrast, Asura folded his arms and puffed out his chest, unable to read the mood at all.

“Right on! I’m Hex Arm Asura. Nice to meetcha! I bet Ashy’s been a bother, but if anythin’ happens with her, lemme know! I’m her boyfriend!”

“Since when has that been the case?” Alshiera asked in shock.

“Huh? I’m not? I’ve said I love you so many times, and you didn’t seem against it or anything.”

“Please be quiet already...” Alshiera grumbled.

Currently in the form of an old woman, Orias gave Alshiera’s shoulder a pat with an amused smile.

“This here is Richard,” Zagan said, gesturing to the knight. “He’s recently been promoted from an Angelic Knight to an Archangel. He’s currently serving as Nephteros’s exclusive knight.”

“Yeah! I really owe you for last time! I hope we get along, Richard!” Asura exclaimed.

“Yes. Best regards, Asura,” Richard replied.

“What? Are you two acquainted?” Zagan asked, surprised by their exchange.

“Yup! We traveled together from this town called Raziell!” Asura answered. “I know he’s goin’ out with that seraph...I mean, elf over there too! They’re real close!”

That remark made Nephteros’s dark skin turn bright red as she averted her eyes.

“Asura, you shouldn’t speak of how well a man and woman get along in front of others,” Richard stated, standing as if to protect Nephteros behind him and flashing a dreadfully handsome smile.

He can give off such a nice air of intimidation now.

Back when Zagan had first met him, Richard had been no more than an unreliable and common Angelic Knight. His growth was splendid. Honestly, Zagan was a little moved.

“Huh?! Really...?” Asura said, looking truly shocked by this. “My bad. Things are really different from my era, huh?”

“Oh, it’s fine,” Richard said. “If it stems from the gap in time, then there’s no helping it. Just keep that in mind for future reference.”

“Umm...even a thousand years ago, such behavior demonstrated a lack of common sense...” Alshiera commented.

She would’ve continued running away had Asura not gone this far, so there wasn’t much that could be done about that. Seeing that everyone already knew each other, Zagan realized that maybe there hadn’t been a need to formally introduce them. In the end, all he had accomplished was shaming Alshiera unnecessarily, but what was done was done.

“Hey Richard,” Asura said. “Can you show me Camael...that Sacred Sword?”

“Yes, here, go ahead,” Richard replied as he smoothly drew his

greatsword and held it by the blade and hilt before Asura.

“Hmm. So you ended up like this, huh? Well, back then you were all armored up, so I don’t got a clue what you actually looked—Ow!”

Asura casually patted the blade and was assaulted by a stinging electrical discharge. The two had been enemies a thousand years ago, so him getting all friendly like that out of the blue was deserving of a little animosity. Watching Asura blow on his hand to cool it down, Richard smiled in amusement.

“Umm, Camael can be a little moody, so you shouldn’t touch her.”

“Say that first...”

“I think it’s unfair to expect others to anticipate your eccentric behavior...” Alshiera added in exasperation.

So that’s what she looks like when she acts naturally.

Before Zagan, Alshiera always seemed to be bracing herself, but when being strung along by Asura, her expression matched her appearance. It felt somewhat odd when he considered the fact that she was his mother, but this was a moment of rest that had finally been granted to her after a thousand years of continual battle, so Zagan decided to pretend not to notice.

Before anyone knew it, the heavy atmosphere was gone. Perhaps because of this, Nephteros tugged on Richard’s sleeve.

“Richard. You’ve been thinking of breaking the Sacred Swords?” she asked somewhat sulkily.

“Yes, well...”

“You could’ve discussed it with me first...”

Richard faltered for an instant as Nephteros puffed out her cheeks, but he immediately returned a stout smile.

“Nephteros, there are times a man wants to save face,” he said. “It’s far too embarrassing for me to come to you about it when I have no idea what to do.”

“You see me embarrassed all the time, though...”

“Guh...”

Richard arched back from the unexpected attack, but he still lowered his voice and brought his face right next to Nephteros’s ear.

“It’s because you’re like this that I’ve come to love you,” he whispered. “Please forgive me.”

Seeing his sister-in-law and her man form a space just for themselves before an Archdemon, both Zagan and Orias were thrown into a state of shock.

Damn you, Richard! To think you’ve acquired so much power!

Such a comeback was barely out of reach for Zagan. If Nephry pouted at him like that, he was sure to lose all dignity and falter. And yet, this man had acted like a perfect gentleman. Zagan had no choice but to admire Richard’s strength.

Perhaps inspired by her little sister, Nephy had suddenly crept up next to Zagan and tugged on his sleeve. She then puffed out her cheeks just a little, her pointy ears quivering somewhat peevishly. Strangely enough, it was the exact same expression Nephteros had made earlier.

Nephy...wants me to fawn over her?

It was unusual for her to do something like that in front of others. Despite being before an Archdemon, the only ones here were those who flirted without hesitation. It seemed Nephy had gotten jealous. It was true that Zagan had been holed up in the workshop lately, working on getting Nephy's present ready, so his time with Nephy had been lacking.

"Hyah!"

To start, and calm down in a sense, Zagan remained seated on his throne and lifted Nephy onto his lap.

At times like this, having her on my lap really is the best!

With that thought in mind, he came to a sudden realization. If he was always satisfied with this, did that mean he'd made no progress whatsoever?

Maybe the time has come to advance to the next stage.

He had to give her the wedding ring soon. He couldn't remain at a standstill forever.

"Um, um, Master Zagan?" Nephy said in bewilderment. "I-It's true I wanted you to pamper me a little, but I don't think this is really appropriate right now..."

Seeing her act so serious, Zagan nodded with exaggerated mannerisms, then whispered in her ear.

"Very well. We'll continue this later, then...N-Nephelia."

Nephy was her nickname. She had a proper name in Nephelia, but Zagan had never actually called her that, so doing so was a new step forward for him.

Hnnngh, but why does it feel so embarrassing?!

It felt like his blood was boiling. He knew his face was bright red. How much easier would it be if he simply let this sensation carry his consciousness away? And yet, he felt a tremendous sense of accomplishment and fulfillment. Nephy was, of course, an adorable and lovable nickname, but he keenly felt how much meaning saying her name properly had.

Mmm... Nephelia is such a beautiful name!

After whispering that name to her, he noticed her pointy ears tremble in a stunned manner.

"Haaaugh!"

One of her ears slapped against Zagan's cheek repeatedly as she let out something like a shriek. Her head swayed as if she was going to

pass out, but she was also an Archdemon now, so she mustered her willpower, opened her eyes wide, and brought her lips close to Zagan's ear in return.

"Th-Thi is the first time I've heard you call me by my name...Z-Zagan."

She'd dropped the "Master" for the very first time. He hadn't expected this counterattack.

"Hnnngh!"

Upon hearing his name called so affectionately, Zagan received a tremendously agonizing shock to his heart. The two Archdemons were stunned, and a colossal amount of mana poured from their Sigils, shaking the entirety of Archdemon Palace. Above ground, merchants were telling tourists, "Oh, this happens when our Archdemons get intimate, so please don't worry about it." One of the reasons Zagan had been so busy was because he'd had to prepare sorcery to make the town resistant to earthquakes.

Witnessing the two of them like this, the other flirting couples returned to their senses. Upon noticing their gazes, Zagan once more cleared his throat.

"Let's get back on track. About the Sacred Swords—"

"Do you plan on remaining like that?" Alshiera said, pointing out the obvious.

Zagan nodded with all the majesty of an Archdemon and replied, "We've simply gone weak in the knees and can't stand. Don't worry about it."

Nephy covered her face and nodded vigorously in agreement. Calling each other by their names was still too early for them. Even using the power of the Archdemon who specialized in strengthening his body, Zagan couldn't rise to his feet.

"What have you two been doing for the entire year you've been a couple?" Alshiera asked.

"You're the one person I don't want to hear that from... Asura, come here a sec," Zagan said, then whispered in his ear.

"I don't really mind, but what's the point?" Asura responded. The innocent idiot cocked his head in confusion, but still ran over to Alshiera's side.

"You're not really one to talk, are you now, Alshiera?" he whispered.

"Hgh..."

Asura also only ever referred to her as Ashy. Alshiera strained her lips tight to keep her mouth shut, either trying to endure something or trying not to admit it, but it was easy to see how she felt because her ears were bright red. She looked more satisfied than she let on and fell silent.

“Oooh...”

Asura stared at her in amusement. Zagan looked down at her from his throne in triumph, but still couldn't stand up. Everyone else was looking at them, thinking, “What are this mother and son up to?” but Zagan didn't pay them any attention. One thought did come to mind, however.

A thousand years...

One millennium ago, she'd married the second Silver-Eyed King, Lucia, right before he died. Had she spent the following thousand years, what amounted to multitudes of normal human lives, without lowering her guard around anyone? No, that couldn't be the case. She may not have had the strong feelings for anyone else as she'd had for Lucia, but the Alshiera Zagan knew didn't have such dulled emotions. And yet, it wasn't like she'd forgotten her feelings for Lucia or anything either. But then, what exactly did she feel for Asura?

He was her first love. That was a big deal, of course, but that was no more than the trigger for what she felt for the man before her now. Asura wasn't “a shadow from a thousand years ago,” but a living, breathing being of the present age. That was why Alshiera was facing him properly. And yet, Silver-Eyes had been resurrected in the same manner as Asura, so that made it impossible for her to put everything in order.

That's because Silver-Eyes chose not to be Lucia.

If he'd chosen to live as Lucia, it probably wouldn't have become this troublesome. However, much like how Asura had claimed, “That's got nothin' to do with me bein' me,” nobody could force Silver-Eyes to be someone else. Besides, Zagan didn't hate the man Silver-Eyes was now.

Zagan still didn't know what a father really was, but he was sure Alshiera at least thought of him as a beloved relative. Well, in the end, this was a problem only she could answer for herself. It wasn't Zagan's place to pry, so he tucked his thoughts away in a corner of his mind.

“Do you mind if we get back to the matter at hand?” Orias asked.

“Yes, let's,” Zagan replied, nodding, prompting Nephy to straighten her posture on his lap.

“I can't say much on matters that require us to investigate what a Sacred Sword truly is, but...” Orias started. “Lady Alshiera, you said they were created by offering the bodies and souls of the beings known as seraphs, correct?”

“Yes, exactly,” Alshiera confirmed.

“If so, would that mean the seraphs were resurrected within the vessels known as Sacred Swords?” Orias postulated, then turned to Nephteros. “There exists a method to move a soul from one vessel to another. Celestial mysticism can't accomplish this, but it's a technique

that has been fostered for ages through sorcery. The possibilities are hidden within homunculi and Zagan's Heaven's Scale Prayer's Shell."

"I see. You mean transplanting their souls into a proper body," Zagan said.

That was a far gentler method than destroying the Sacred Swords down to the souls within. If they still wanted to die afterward, they were free to kill themselves at their own leisure, much like they were free to rejoice in their new lives.

"However, the problem is how exactly their souls are bound," Zagan added.

They were trapped in cages that hadn't wavered in a thousand years. The main question was how to break those cages.

"This is unknown technology even to former and current Archdemons," Orias said, nodding. "It might not be impossible, but I'm sure it'll take time."

"Hmm... Mom, how are these Sacred Swords or Seraphic Blades or whatnot made, anyway?" Zagan asked.

"I don't know," Alshiera answered, shaking her head. "At the time, various circumstances had me dead, after all."

"You were dead?"

Everyone doubted their ears, but Alshiera put a finger to her lips. This was apparently something she *couldn't* talk about.

When it came to blacksmithing, Naberius came to mind, but it was questionable how much of a grasp he had of matters from a thousand years ago. Above all else, Zagan was about to reach the limit of how much he could use that man by taking advantage of his weakness. It wouldn't matter if Naberius went on a frenzied rage—Zagan would be able to steal his Sigil in that case—as the biggest concern was if Naberius fed him false information. Zagan had no way of verifying the veracity of such claims, and even if he did, Naberius would escape before Zagan figured it out. As such, it was too dangerous to rely on the beholder.

In that case, the only one who knows how they're made is Marchosias...

However, there was no way that man would simply give them the answer if asked. Zagan shifted his focus to Nephteros. As far as he knew, when it came to homunculi, Nephteros's creator had been the most knowledgeable. It would be far too cruel to question her about Bifrons after they'd left her with such deeply rooted trauma, though. And as he racked his brain over what to do, Nephteros suddenly raised her voice with an "Ah."

"What is it?" Zagan asked.

"Um, I'm not sure if it'll be of any use, but..." she said.

"I don't mind. Let's hear it. We need information above all else

right now.”

“Bifrons once mentioned that there was someone who specialized in homunculi more than they did,” Nephteros murmured. “Now that I think about it, Bifrons might’ve been testing whether I was self-aware at the time, but it seems their knowledge of homunculi was stolen from this other sorcerer.”

“Hmm, and who’s that?” Zagan asked.

“Puppetmaster Forneus.”

Zagan and Orias both raised a brow at the mention of that name.

“Archdemon Forneus, huh?”

As an Archdemon, only another Archdemon could surpass Bifrons in their own field.

“Forneus stands at the peak when it comes to all alchemy, including the art of creating homunculi,” Orias stated. “No, that’s not quite right... Founder would be a more suitable term.”

“A founder?” Zagan repeated, his eyes widening.

“It is said that alchemy’s history spans seven hundred years. One of the first to delve into the art was Forneus.”

In other words, Forneus had created the very school of sorcery that was now classified as alchemy.

“I see. Transplanting a soul is, in fact, a technique that was born due to the creation of homunculi, so a founder must be a specialist in the field,” Zagan said as he nodded, then remembered hearing that name somewhere else too. “Now that I think about it, Forneus’s disciple is also a former Archdemon candidate.”

Gremory had brought up the name when Zagan had questioned her about Vepar.

“Thunder God Furfur, was it?” Zagan continued. “We’ve never met, but perhaps we can expect something from Forneus’s disciple.”

“Hmm. If we reach our limit, contacting one or the other might be a good idea,” Orias said.

If it was beneficial to work with them, they could come to an agreement. And if they were hostile, then they could just nip a future troublemaker in the bud. At any rate, Zagan still wanted a Sigil to give to Barbatos.

Marchosias seems to be scheming something, so I need a good grasp of what all the Archdemons are up to.

To Zagan, this line of investigation was convenient no matter how things turned out.

The group continued sharing information and proposals, but there was far too much they didn’t know about the Sacred Swords.

“We can create a substitute vessel one way or another, but our main problem is that we don’t know what the inside of a Sacred Sword is like,” Zagan muttered, and just then... “Oh, excuse me, that’s

all for today.”

“Did something happen, Master Zagan?”

“We have an uninvited guest.”

Finally able to get some strength into his legs, Zagan quietly rose to his feet.



“Hah? So what do you wanna talk about—Archdemon Eligor?”

In Kianoides’s tavern, Barbatos was face-to-face with a certain sorcerer. This was one of the three Archdemons obeying Marchosias, famed for possessing the greatest foresight among all sorcerers. No, describing it as foresight wasn’t quite appropriate. She apparently saw the future.

Not foresight, not prediction, the future. It was said that, by some power, she could see a predetermined future, and once seen, it was impossible even for her to change it. It was far too tremendous a power, which was why her eyes were sealed by charms.

Can’t believe she cut off her damn sight for the exact opposite reason Vepar did.

She appeared around twenty years old, which she also had in common with Vepar. Well, the twenties were when the physical body reached its peak, so many sorcerers chose to appear that age. She seemed to be dressed in Liucaon’s fashion. She wore a kimono that was boldly open from her shoulders to her chest, giving a good view of her ample breasts, which looked like they could spill out at any moment. She had a mole beneath her lips, giving her quite a sensual impression. However, in contrast to that, she wore a collar with a thick chain attached to it that seemed more fitting for a hound than her alluring figure.

Eligor smiled gracefully, then poured a drink into Barbatos’s glass.

“I wonder? Have you heard about us from Archdemon Zagan, Purgatory Barbatos?” she asked, a sweet scent wafting over from her.

Barbatos sighed.

She’s a fine woman, but I missed out on being an Archdemon ’cause these assholes snatched the last Sigil.

As such, he didn’t have a friendly impression of them by any standard. She was still a beauty with large breasts who seemed rather open-minded, though.

“You’re the lot who’s plottin’ somethin’ with Eldest Marchosias, yeah?” Barbatos replied, his tone overbearing as he crossed his legs and reclined in his seat. “Haven’t heard much more than nasty rumors about you.”

Despite appearances, Barbatos was very well-informed. He knew of pretty much every rumor that passed among sorcerers.

“Oh my, that’s a misunderstanding,” Eligor said, shrugging regretfully. “We’re simply looking at the bigger picture.”

“Says you.”

Eligor swirled her glass, smiling like she was watching a spoiled child.

“Let’s see...” she continued. “For example, are you aware that demons have been appearing all over the continent again?”

“Well, I’ve heard the rumors...”

Barbatos had once attempted to summon a demon, but had failed. The direct cause had been Zagan’s interference, but even had he succeeded, he didn’t have the confidence that he’d have been able to control it. Much like with golems and chimeras, sorcerers weren’t capable of owning a familiar that surpassed their own power. If anything of the like was summoned, they would start by killing the sorcerer, after all.

Still, as I am now, I bet I can beat one or two demons.

However, it would be unreasonable for him to take on a group of the things. Seeing his reaction, Eligor nodded in satisfaction.

“While all of you were playing with Shere Khan, we’ve been the ones dealing with them,” she said. “Thanks to us, the world still hasn’t been destroyed, has it now?”

“So what do the oh-so-great protectors of the world want with me?” Barbatos asked, snorting.

Eligor folded her arms, bewitchingly supporting her voluptuous breasts.

“I’ll cut to the chase,” she whispered sweetly. “Do you have any interest in joining us?”

Her unexpected offer had Barbatos bewildered.

“We value you highly,” she said. “Your space manipulation sorcery has reached Valley Cat Furas’s territory. In fact, now that Furas has fallen, no sorcerer in this age rivals you in this aspect.”

Not accustomed to receiving so much praise, Barbatos felt uplifted, even if this was probably no more than lip service.

“Well, it don’t feel bad to be buttered up by an Archdemon,” he said. “But what do I got to gain from this?”

“We can prepare you a seat as an Archdemon. Would that be sufficient?” she answered playfully.

“You serious?” Barbatos asked, now no longer able to completely brush her aside.

“Do you believe I’d bring an empty promise to someone capable of enacting revenge?”

Barbatos’s sorcery allowed him to trace the mana of anyone he’d seen in person, then use their “shadow” as a medium to traverse space. He could do the same to an Archdemon. There wasn’t a soul

out there he couldn't kill if he spotted even a single opening.



This was proof that she truly assessed Barbatos's sorcery highly. However, that was precisely why he couldn't give a careless answer.

"The fact that you're comin' to me now means that you great Archdemons got a place you can't reach, and the guy who should've been able to get you there is beyond recovery... That about sum it up?"

"Hee hee, a clever one, aren't you? I rather like clever boys."

"Well, glad to hear it."

In all likelihood, these negotiations had originally been intended for Archdemon Furcas, since there were places only he could reach. However, Furcas had been broken in a certain incident. As he was now, he was a total amateur who didn't know the ABCs of sorcery. Taking that into consideration with the manifestation of demons that Eligor had just mentioned...

"A place only Valley Cat Furcas could've reached—there's only one place I can think of," Barbatos said.

Eligor grinned at him in silence. This was enough to inform him that he was right on the mark.

"That means making an enemy of *that*," Barbatos continued. "Ain't that a bit too risky? An Archdemon's seat don't balance it out."

Making an enemy of Zagan, the other Archdemons, and any of the wielders of Sacred Swords was right up his alley. However, *that* was the only thing he couldn't handle. He was liable to lose his head, and he doubted Eligor or Marchosias could protect him. That was what it meant to pick that fight.

What's more, it's 'cause Furcas did that that he ended up beyond recovery.

He didn't know what the Archdemon had seen, but there was no guarantee Barbatos wouldn't go through the same thing. No matter how tempting the reward was, the risk was far too great.

"You're more informed than I thought," Eligor finally said. "But it shouldn't be all that bad a trade for you. Marchosias can prepare a reward that you desire. Let's see... For example..."

She paused to put on airs, then turned her blindfolded eyes right toward Barbatos.

"A hint on how to deal with your sorcery being devoured, perhaps?" she finished.

Barbatos narrowed his eyes sharply. If she'd offered him Archdemon Zagan's head, he would've excused himself. Barbatos was going to be the one to defeat Zagan, after all. He wouldn't let anyone else take that prize. If anyone tried to butt in, Barbatos would start by killing them first. However, this Archdemon was offering a hint to get around Zagan's ability.

Even after a whole year, Barbatos had yet to find a solution. He wanted it more than anything else, yet didn't want anybody's help either. Getting just a hint was a far too precise point of compromise.

What a pain in the ass...

However, those words definitely shook Barbatos's heart. As he sat there speechlessly, Eligor finished her glass.

"Sorry, did I get too ahead of myself?" she asked. "I won't ask you for an answer right away, but I hope you give it some thought."

Eligor smiled, and after setting aside a generous tip for the drinks, she left.

It's a tempting offer, but there's gotta be a catch.

Regardless, it was still far too attractive.

I mean, that asshole Zagan always fuckin' punches me, but never says a goddamn word of thanks!

Barbatos and Zagan were tied by a contract, but they weren't allies and he wasn't Zagan's subordinate. It was a pretty good deal to draw a clear line from now on. After thinking it through that far, Barbatos prostrated himself over the table.

The hell do I do about the crybaby, then?

If he cut ties with Zagan, it would mean annulling the request to guard Chastille. He was already stuck between a rock and a hard place because of all those strange rumors. Well, the answer was clear just by the fact that he was worrying about it, but Barbatos was blind to that.

"No, even without the contract, I can use the shadows to stay... No! Why do I gotta stay with the crybaby?! Quit screwin' with me!"

Those sitting at the adjacent table reeled back from the creepy sorcerer who was muttering to himself while prostrate over his table.

"What's with him...?"

"Remember? He's the one from those rumors."

"What rumors?"

"The elopement."

"Aaah..."

"I'll goddamn slaughter you all!" Barbatos yelled, but for some reason, the others looked at him with sympathy, seemingly cheering him on, and even treated him to a drink.



Around the time Barbatos and Eligor's meeting ended, Zagan stepped out into Kianoides. This was his domain. He'd set up a barrier to be able to eavesdrop on others for times like these, though it couldn't cover every last corner of the town. The tavern Barbatos had gone to was often used as a gathering place for sorcerers, so Zagan had it covered.

That damn Marchosias. He chooses now, of all times, to try to recruit

Barbatos?

Honestly, Zagan didn't give a damn who that idiot Barbatos went to serve, but now wasn't a good time. He needed the man to be a bridge between the church and sorcerers. It was precisely because he was utter scum as a sorcerer that there was meaning behind using him for such a matter. That said, Zagan doubted that Barbatos would do anything to betray Chastille, but this was Barbatos. He was smart, but somehow still stupid. That was just who he was.

I can't deny the possibility that he'll mindlessly tag along, thinking, "Man, she's a fine woman."

Thinking of it normally, that was utterly impossible, but Zagan had personally experienced how little normal mattered to a painful extent. That was how untrustworthy and thoughtless Barbatos could be. Thus far, just punching him in the face each time was enough, but with Marchosias knocking on his door, Zagan couldn't resort to that.

"Looks like I'll have to give her a little warning."

As such, Zagan dropped by the church.

"—It's been a long time since you've visited me here."

Zagan hadn't shown up lately because of the battle with Shere Khan and having to deal with the aftermath, but this wasn't his first time visiting the church. The Three Idiots of the Azure Sky made a fuss again, but had quickly allowed him inside. Well, they had someone they had to be far warier of than Zagan, so that only made sense. Having Barbatos take the brunt of public attention had been worth it.

Zagan took a seat on the guest sofa in Chastille's office and was offered tea by a nun. She looked to be around fifteen or sixteen. Zagan had never seen her before, yet she seemed to be staring rather curiously at him. It was like she didn't possess a hint of timidity, or had no concept of fear, or simply had guts of steel. That was how Zagan saw her.

Those are the eyes of someone who's overcome death many times.

It didn't look like she had any knowledge of sorcery or swordsmanship, but human strength wasn't measured in mere martial prowess or sorcery. Just by the fact that she'd stopped Chastille with tremendous vigor when Chastille had half risen to her feet saying she'd make some tea, Zagan could see that she was very talented. He took a sip...and found the drink unexpectedly good.

"Hmm, a nice flavor. It must've taken significant trial and error to draw this taste out," he said. "Somehow or other, I can sense the hardships you've gone through. To draw out such flavor at such a young age... Chastille, you'd better treat this one well."

She obviously wasn't at Nephy's level, so he didn't bother mentioning that.

“Thank God...!” the nun exclaimed, overcome by emotion.
“Someone with a functioning sense of taste!”

“Uhhh...” Zagan mumbled, directing a suspicious gaze toward Chastille.

I’ve heard her sense of taste is awful, but is it enough for her attendant to cry over?

He was starting to suspect the impression he’d had of this girl overcoming death many times was because she’d had Chastille’s tea.

“Chastille...” he said, raising his caution to its highest levels.
“You’re not going to tell me that you have no damn clue what this tea tastes like, are you?”

“Th-That’s not true! I think Rachel’s tea is delicious too!”

Zagan narrowed his eyes, doubting she was telling the truth, and the nun began panicking and shaking her head.

“Y-You’re wrong; it’s not Lady Chastille’s fault,” she said. “It’s just, she gives the same impression when she drinks my tea and Mister Barbatos’s tea, so I got anxious about it all on my own!”

The way she so desperately tried to cover for Chastille actually made her look even more pitiful.

“You! Apologize to her right now!” Zagan yelled. “How can you give the same impression between sewage and tea?!”

“B-Barbatos’s tea isn’t so bad that it should be compared to sewage,” Chastille said.

“If not sewage, then poison. That stuff is enough to kill a man!”

The nun next to him nodded vigorously.

So she was made to drink Barbatos’s tea, eh? How pitiful...

Zagan knew how bad Barbatos’s cooking was. To even claim that it wasn’t bad meant that no normal logic could be applied to Chastille anymore, which made sense, since Chastille herself had been banished from Nephy’s kitchen after Nephy had tasted one bite of Chastille’s cooking. And yet, Barbatos and Chastille had no idea how bad they were, so it was impossible to persuade either of them.

“Well, whatever,” Zagan said, shaking his head. “I didn’t come here to criticize your foul sense of taste.”

“I don’t recall it ever needing any criticism...”

She really is exactly like Barbatos...

Somehow enduring the urge to punch her, Zagan made a serious expression.

“What’s happened with those rumors in the church since then?” he asked.

“Nothing’s changed...” Chastille answered. “They’re still saying I eloped, and now they’re spreading half-truths about my relationship with Barbatos. I have a feeling it’s even worse than before.”

That was only to be expected after having Barbatos spend every

day with her out in the open. Just as planned, the rumors were spreading well. This was likely the fruit of Gremory's publicity. The granny was really talented at times like these, which was a problem in and of itself.

"I'm sure it's rough, but can you endure it a little longer?" Zagan asked, making a sympathetic look as if this pained his heart. "I'm making a move too. I'm sure the rumors will die down soon."

"Can I really believe you...?"

Even Chastille was likely starting to suspect that she was being tricked.

Well, ever since the rumors began, the two have always been alone in her office.

How could raunchy rumors not spread? Rather, because Gremory had been spreading this news all over the place, it was far beyond anyone's control at this point. So, really, everything was going well. That was why it would be problematic if Barbatos got himself stupidly killed.

"But..." Zagan said, looking like he found it really hard to say this. "There is one problem. That's why I'm here."

Chastille didn't notice that he'd brazenly changed the topic.

"A problem?" she asked, straightening her posture.

"Yeah, it's about Barbatos."

That one word was enough to get the nun to hit the table and bend forward in excitement.

"What?"

"Oh, no, please don't mind me," the nun said, sliding into a corner of the room and quietly vanishing.

She might be better than Kuu at killing her presence... Who the hell is that girl?

She might have even been closing in on Kuroka's territory. For a second, her skills even made Zagan suspect that Chastille was trying to start up a new dark side of the church.

"Has something happened to him?" Chastille asked, not even questioning the nun's behavior.

"Y-Yeah. Actually..." pausing for gravitas, Zagan spoke in a heavy tone. "That idiot got seduced by a certain woman."

"Uhhh... By that, you mean...?" Chastille said, her eyes turning into dots.

"She's a sorcerer, and it turns out she's right in his strike zone. He was remarkably shaken by her advances, so it made me curious."

"Barbatos is a man too. It isn't strange for a woman to try to seduce him, is it?" Chastille said with a smile. She then took a sip of tea and continued to speak with a composed expression. "I believe in him. He might get a little merry and haughty, but he's one of us. He

won't leave just because of that."

Chastille was both dignified and resolute.

I'm surprised she can brag like that.

If she was going to act this way, she was better off just going out with the man, but it was unreasonable to ask those two to just honestly start a relationship. This was good enough progress on an emotional level, at least.

The nun in the corner had a handkerchief to her nose. The fact that it was stained bright red was somewhat concerning. Regardless, Zagan hadn't come here to listen to Chastille brag about Barbatos.

"That Barbatos?" he asked.

"That Barbatos," she affirmed.

Chastille was apparently in work mode, which made sense, since he'd visited her during the day. She didn't waver for an instant. Seeing his sworn friend act so reliably, Zagan returned a smile of admiration.

"This is the same guy who nearly got killed for trying to steal my grimoires, then acted like it was nothing and tried again. The same guy who knows he's going to get punched, yet doesn't think of the consequences and runs his mouth to ruin the moment. Is he really going to be fine? Just so you know, he's smart, but an inborn idiot."

A small crack ran down Chastille's work mode mask.



Too soft, Chastille. You should know how bad he can be.

Barbatos's lack of credibility was so bad that Zagan couldn't even think of anyone to compare him to. No matter how much faith Chastille had, his habitual behavior was far too sleazy. There was nothing to believe in at a fundamental level, so the only thing she had to go on was the desire to believe in him.

"But I mean, B-Barbatos is, um...!"

Chastille was clearly breaking down, her eyes darting left and right. And as if to aggravate that, Zagan whispered to her with a voice of concern.

"I don't mean to say anything about your relationship with him, but this is Barbatos we're talking about. I figured I should let you know."

"R-Relationship?! W-We're not..." Chastille trailed off there, putting a hand to her chest. Cold sweat dripped down her brow.

"Umm, what...kind of woman was she?" she asked timidly.

"Let's see... A sorcerer with long hair whose eyesight is sealed. You'll know her if you see her. She looks like she's in her twenties. So, how to put it...? She's pretty much exactly the kind of woman Barbatos prefers."

There weren't many sorcerers out there who wore such an ominous blindfold. With that, Chastille rose to her feet as if there wasn't a moment to waste.

"Z-Zagan? Sorry, I just remembered I have some urgent business to attend to."

"Seems so. I dropped by unannounced, so don't worry about me and go right ahead."

After watching Chastille run off in a hurry, the nun then shuffled over to him.

"Um, is what you just said true?" she asked. "About Mister Barbatos and another woman, I mean..."

"It's true."

"Mister Barbatos is a really awful person, but when it comes to Lady Chastille, he's not the type to do anything to, like, bother her or get her to hate him, you know?"

Zagan's eyes widened. Despite being from the church, this girl seemed to be a rather good judge of character. In that case, he realized it was fine to tell her.

"I didn't lie," Zagan said, savoring his tea. "Right now, he's being headhunted by an outside force. They're dangling a tantalizing reward in front of him and he seems to be wavering. However, it'd be problematic if that guy gets taken away, so it's Chastille's turn to step up."

“I understand fully!” the nun said, throwing up a thumb as blood trickled down from her nose.

That was a type of smile Zagan was *very* familiar with.

Aaah... She's one of Gremory and Manuela's kind.

Zagan updated his internal list of people he didn't want to get involved with.

At this point, he had no way of knowing he'd just made things even more complicated.



“It really is inconvenient not being able to go in and out of other towns, especially because we don't have enough materials or food.”

In the capital of the oppressed, Foll made an indecipherable expression. She was inside a room in the largest building in the capital. She was the Archdemon who ruled this domain, so she handled her daily business from here. Well, in terms of the capital's scale, this was more akin to the consultation room of the elder's house. She was getting pretty accustomed to her new uniform, so her presence as an Archdemon seemed a little more pronounced. The Nephilim twins, Dexia and Aristella, stood at her sides, making the same expression as her as they helped organize all this information and propose plans. Foll was going to let them go out to town and have some nice candy as a reward.

The town that the Nephilim had created here functioned properly as a settlement, but wasn't affluent enough to be self-sufficient. They'd somehow managed to get the canal and houses reconstructed using their own technique and ingenuity, but they weren't able to procure raw materials like food and silk. Above all else, they were lacking in entertainment. Nobody had complained yet simply because they were filled with a sense of accomplishment from building a town for themselves, but now that it was in a shape that could be called a town, it was clear as day that they would start looking for entertainment. Or so Dexia and Andrealphus suggested, at least.

“My Lady, if we use the canal, it should be possible to establish trade with Kianoides,” Aristella said. “How about undoing the barrier that blocks cognition of this place only when going in and out?”

“That's probably the only way forward,” Foll replied. “But if we do that, we won't be able to avoid the risk of exposing the capital's location. The Nephilim are anxious, and they still haven't settled their feelings about Zagan. I think it's still too early.”

“In that case, can't we just come and go using teleportation sorcery?” Dexia joined in. “We have the old man too, so I don't think the average sorcerer will be able to trace us.”

“That sounds more doable, but we can't carry much with us that

way,” Foll countered. “It won’t be much of a problem in terms of what can be done by an individual, though.”

This was the method Foll and the others were already using to come and go. Foll sighed at the conundrum.

I’m so inexperienced. I need way more wisdom.

Fundamentally, sorcerers avoided interacting with others. They were self-sufficient individuals, so they weren’t suited for managing large organizations like towns.

I want to wait a little longer before consulting Zagan, but...

Things were going to calm down soon, but Zagan’s current priority was Nephy’s upcoming birthday in two weeks. Until then, Foll had to somehow manage on her own. That was when a sudden thought came to mind.

Oh yeah, Horse Head’s birthday is soon too, isn’t it?

Chastille’s birthday was supposedly only five days before Nephy’s. Well, it seemed Gremory was playing around on that end, so Foll had no intention of getting involved.

As she racked her brain over what to do, a knock came at the door. It was a visitor, and upon realizing who it was, Foll quickly raised her head.

“Come in, Shax, Kuroka.”

In an unusual turn, one of the new Archdemons and his romantic partner had come to visit. Setting Shax aside, this was the first time Kuroka had dropped by.

“Long time no see, Foll,” she said.

“Good to see you again, Kuroka. Are your eyes okay?” Foll asked, hopping up from her seat and running over to Kuroka.

Kuroka accepted Foll’s hug with familiarity and gently brushed her head. Her hand was just about as pleasant as Nephy’s, so Foll naturally narrowed her eyes in delight. These two girls had close ties to Raphael and got along well. During the time Kuroka had spent recuperating in Zagan’s castle, the two of them had spoken pretty much every single day.

“You’re all worrying too much. I keep telling you I’m fine,” Kuroka replied.

Kuroka could now be considered the greatest samurai in the world, but not too long ago, she’d been blind.

Maybe because of that, weird things have been happening.

When Kuroka’s emotions ran high, her eyes apparently changed colors. The exact cause of this had yet to be identified, so Kuroka hadn’t been informed of it. Bearing in mind that she was a descendant of the Silver-Eyed King, it would be natural to assume that this was an influence of her bloodline, but it was completely unknown what effects it had.

The scariest possibility is her losing her sight again.

Next time, Nephy might not be able to heal her. As such, Shax had been neurotically careful with her. That said, if Foll worried about her too, Kuroka would end up noticing.

"Everyone thinks of you dearly, Kuroka," Foll said, shaking her head.

Around that time, Aristella brought over some drinks.

"Here you go."

"Oh, there's no need for that," Kuroka said.

Despite saying that, judging it would be rude not to drink the tea now that it'd been poured, Kuroka and Shax sat side by side on the sofa.

"So? What brings you here today?" Foll asked.

"Oh, well, we're gonna head over to Kurosuke's old home. We're just here to give our greetings before heading out. We owe a lot to the people here and all."

Shax had gone through his training as an Archdemon here. He'd been worked to the bone until he collapsed every day, and the Nephilim had been the ones who looked after him.

"You've decided to go see your home, then?" Foll asked, smiling in relief.

"Yes. In truth, I would've liked to go back earlier," Kuroka answered. "However, we got held up with a bunch of matters."

Kuroka had cut down Archdemon Andrealphus in a head-on confrontation. It was said she'd handily defeated last generation's Head Archangel too. To the church, she was both a beneficial and dangerous prospect. That was why she hadn't been able to make any moves until her safety was guaranteed.

"Are Lilith and them not going with you?" Foll asked.

"Umm... No," Kuroka answered, shyly shifting her focus to Shax.

Meaning she wanted to go with Shax over the others? Or is it more that she wanted to be alone with him? Is this also love?

It was endlessly mysterious.

"Well, the boss asked me to go as an envoy too," Shax added casually, not clear whether he realized Kuroka's feelings. "We can't go bringing the little lady Lilith along for that."

Shax was now one of the Archdemons, so him making a personal move couldn't be treated as a simple visit home.

In any case, upon taking a closer look, Foll noticed that Kuroka had her hand half held out off the sofa like she really wanted to hold his hand, but Shax showed no signs of noticing. Kuroka's triangular ears drooped down and she returned her hand to where it was.

Foll didn't see this as entirely Shax's fault, however. Kuroka's two tails coiled around Shax's back nonstop. He had his attention drawn to

that, so he hadn't been focused on her other gestures.

Shax took a sip of tea and smiled back at Foll. She was surprised by how calmly he could act in such a situation. She felt deep admiration for how magnanimous the new Archdemon was.

"Looks like it's been pretty rough. Managing the capital, I mean," Shax said.

"Mmm... It's about time to procure goods and entertainment, but we can't just allow people to come and go as they please," Foll said.

She felt like he was forcing the topic to change, but Foll's head was already full of Shax and Kuroka missing each other's signals. As such, she just went along with it.

The capital of the oppressed was a settlement meant to hide the Nephilim. If its existence was made public, its meaning would be lost.

"Sounds like a pain," Shax said, nodding.

"In short, the problem is that you can't hide people as they enter and leave the capital?" Kuroka asked, her triangular ears twitching as she cocked her head.

"Yup," Foll confirmed.

No matter how sneaky they were, if they had to acquire a considerable amount of supplies, their existence would one day become known. It wouldn't be a problem if the Nephilim had a foundation to manage on their own, but that was too much to ask of a town that'd just been built. And yet, Kuroka looked like she had a great idea.

"In that case, can't you just be more bold?" she said.

Everyone else exchanged glances.

"Meaning?" Dexia asked.

Kuroka held up a finger and continued, "For example, if you pack a boat full of goods and teleport it, there would only be a few people who could follow it, right?"

At the very least, it would have to be a sorcerer who was well-versed in spatial teleportation. Kuroka was also implying that this would be a foolish undertaking in Zagan's town when Barbatos was around.

"That's true, but it'll cost way too much," Dexia said, shaking her head. "The more stuff you have to teleport by sorcery, the more mana it takes and the more catalysts you need to compensate. Using it every time we need to bring stuff in and out would put us way, way into the red."

Kuroka and Dexia seemed to be acquainted. They were both really casual with each other, or rather, somewhat affectionate.

"There's no need to actually teleport," Kuroka said. "You just have to make it look like that."

"Huh? What's that mean?" Dexia asked.

Foll was starting to see what Kuroka was getting at.

“If we cast a cognitive block to make it look like teleportation, the number of people who try to track it will decrease,” Foll said. “Any who wouldn’t think it’s just up the canal. Is that what you mean?”

“Yes. To balance the cost, a bluff by making it float in the air might be really effective?”

“That would definitely be possible.”

To sorcerers, there was a theory that the precision of one’s sorcery was proof of its strength. Taking that to an extreme, a bluff that made weak sorcery look stronger was the act of a third-rate sorcerer. As such, nobody would think an Archdemon would do such a thing.

If we do that, we should be able to buy enough time for the Nephilim to become self-reliant.

Foll calculated the specifics of the sorcery that would be needed and how much it would cost, then nodded.

“A great idea. You have my thanks,” she said.

“I’m glad I could help,” Kuroka replied. “Oh, right. I have one more thing to tell you. Father told me to give this to you.”

She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket after saying that.

“From Raphael?”

It was a clipping from a gossip rag.

“A follow-up report! The mysterious girl who’s chasing monsters is named Lily!”

Reading the headline, Foll jumped to her feet.

“Is this about Lily?” she said.

“So you do know her?” Kuroka asked.

“Mhm. A precious friend.”

It’d been half a month now. Kuroka wasn’t acquainted with her, but apparently, the Archdemon who’d washed up in the capital was Lily. There’d been a clash, but after leaving Foll information and vanishing, Foll hadn’t been able to track her whereabouts.

If she’s using the name Lily, does that mean it’s a message for me?

If not, it was hard to believe she would call herself Lily. Foll read over the article, then made a grim expression.

Lily is fighting demons?

Foll didn’t think the girl who went around executing people who were in possession of Spirit Blood would go around saving others. However, according to the article, she’d been doing just that for over a month. In other words, from even before Foll had met her. It seemed she was involved in far more troublesome matters than Foll had believed. Or perhaps this was one of the reasons she’d chosen not to stay with Foll.

Even so, Lily contacted me.

When she thought of it as an awkward correspondence from that

girl, Foll found it all the more endearing.

"Thanks. I know my friend is safe now," Foll said, holding the article to her chest dearly.

"That's good to hear." *There's something I always wanted to ask Shax about Lily.*

Lily was already gone, but she was sure to come back. As such, Foll turned to Shax.

"Shax, can you erase old scars?"

"Old scars?" Shax repeated, bewildered by the sudden question.

"Well, it depends on how cleanly you want it done, but I'm pretty sure I can get rid of almost anything."

"Really?"

Countless scars mercilessly carved their paths across Lily's entire body, so Foll wanted to do something about them for her.

"It's no big deal," Shax said, smiling casually at how hopeful Foll looked. "I'm pretty sure all the current Archdemons and former Archdemon candidates can do it too."

"Huh...?" Foll mumbled, looking dumbfounded at his unexpected comment. "I can't..."

"Want me to teach you? It's not all that complicated. I bet you'll learn it in no time."

Foll felt irritated at how inexperienced she was not to know such simple sorcery, but a certain doubt also came to mind.

Then why is Lily's body covered in scars?

Foll could make sense of it if she'd gotten the scars while her memories were still foggy. She hadn't been able to use sorcery at the time, after all. However, those scars were old. They should've come from when Asmodeus had gone around collecting Spirit Blood.

"If there are scars an Archdemon can't remove, what do you think caused them?" Foll asked.

"Scars an Archdemon can't remove, huh? If there are any, it'd be a curse even sorcery can't heal... No, but an Archdemon would be able to make it look like they're gone on the surface. In that case..."

"Doesn't that mean they chose not to remove them?" Kuroka stated. Shax nodded in agreement.

"What do you mean?" Foll asked, not really understanding.

"There were quite a few people like that in the dark side of the church. They chose to keep their scars. They treated them like vows for revenge, or a bond to someone else, or..." Kuroka paused, hesitating to give her last example for a moment. "Punishment, so that they never forget their sins."

That's why Lily has so many scars...

With that, Foll understood too. Thinking back on it, Lily had never once claimed that collecting Spirit Blood was a righteous cause. Lily

knew better than anyone else that what she was doing was wrong. Nevertheless, it was the only thing she could do. That was why those were scars she couldn't remove.

"Shax, teach me the sorcery that can heal scars," Foll said, understanding this well. "I want to learn it."

If the day came when Lily wanted to get rid of those scars—if she ever chose to forgive herself—Foll wanted to be able to remove them for her.

"Not a problem," Shax answered with a smile.

There were still many issues to resolve, but it looked like the capital of the oppressed was making good progress. Feeling relieved by this, Foll's thoughts suddenly shifted to Kuroka's childhood friends.

Did Lilith and Selphy not want to go with them?



"I wonder if Kuroka's, like, already out on the ocean?"

At Kianoides's harbor, the sorcerers of the castle were heading out on an expedition. Lily, Selphy, and Furas were there to see them off, standing at one of the wharves. Kimaris was also a small distance away, but he always watched over them in silence and never really took part in their conversation.

Their primary reason for coming out here was to see their childhood friend, but because of her somewhat special circumstances, the boat she'd left on was already out of sight. Hearing her other childhood friend's incoherent question, Lilith let out a sigh of exasperation.

"Jeez, Selphy... Obviously not. She said she'd be going to see Lady Foll first, remember?"

"Oh? Now that you mention it, where's Foll's town at?"

Foll was Zagan's adopted daughter, and Zagan was their king. In other words, she was a princess. At first, Selphy had also referred to her as a lady, but she'd dropped it at some point. Well, one of the nice parts of Zagan's family was that they were likely to let that pass. Although, the circumstances were different here, so Lilith shook her head.

"It'd be a total mess if we knew the location of a hideout..." she said.

"Oh, you've totally got a point there!"

Selphy acted as thoughtlessly as ever, but for some reason, Lilith felt relieved.

I mean, she's been acting a little weird lately, so this is definitely better.

Now it felt like Selphy was finally back to her normal self.

"But my bro Shax said he was given important business by my bro

Zagan, right? It's amazing," Furcas said, gazing off into the direction their boat had vanished in.

"That old man is also your *bro*?" Lilith asked.

"Hm...? I mean, he's an Archdemon too, yeah?"

"Is that your criteria? Then what about Lady Nephy and Lady Foll?"

"Uhhh, sis?" Furcas answered, folding his arms.

"At least call them Miss..."

"Miss! That's it! You sure are amazing, Lilith," Furcas said with a grin.

Lilith had no idea what part of that made her amazing.

"Don't you just say everything is amazing?"

She looked astonished, but didn't feel bad. Instead, she pouted and averted her eyes to hide her feelings. In contrast, her tail was drawing circles in the air.

"So then, what'cha gonna call me?" Selphy asked.

"Uhhh... Big sis?"

"Why am I the only big sis...?"

Selphy looked displeased, but compared to not that long ago, the two seemed to be opening up to each other. As their conversation went on, a party came by the wharf. Lilith and the others moved over to the side to get out of the way when she noticed that the majority...or rather, all of them, were familiar faces. One among them, a man with leather bindings covering his face, raised his hand.

"Yo, if it isn't Lilith. Did you come to see us off?" he said.

"That's about right, Behemoth. Kuroka set off today too," Lilith answered.

"Oh yeah."

"Here, a packed lunch. You're all going on a long trip, right?"

Some of them were apparently going to spend a fair amount of time at sea, so Lilith's group had prepared meals for all of them.

Why is the noble princess of the succubi doing this kind of thing...?

She questioned this every once in a while, but it was a little late to complain about it. Besides, since Selphy was doing it with her, it was actually unexpectedly pleasant. As Lilith handed out lunches, the girl standing next to Behemoth nodded.

"Mmm... There's a lot of work to do after a vacation," she said.

"You two just got back too. Must be rough," Lilith said.

That had been about half a month ago. When Lilith's group had visited home, Behemoth and Levia had come with them to handle the logistics. Thanks to them, it'd been a very relaxing trip.

"We got a month off," Levia said, shaking her head. "That's enough."

"The boss took a ton of work off our plates and onto his so that we

could take it easy and get some rest. This time, we've gotta work so that he can rest," Behemoth added.

These two were also aware that Nephy's birthday was coming up. That was why they were helping so that Zagan would be able to forget about everything else and enjoy it.

"Where are you going this time?" Lilith asked.

"Well, here and there. This time, how to put it...? It's like a recruitment drive, I guess?"

Lilith hadn't heard that before.

"By recruitment, you mean new sorcerers are coming to join us?" she asked, wide-eyed.

"I don't know if it'll work out that way, but the boss seems to be starting something."

"Hmm, sounds like a lot of work."

Lilith wasn't entirely unrelated to all this, since if that happened, they'd have to shift the seating arrangements for meals at the castle, and there weren't enough hands to go around.

I wonder if he'll let us get more personnel too?

Because Nephy and Foll had risen to the status of Archdemons, they were no longer able to spend as much time in the kitchen. The chief butler, Raphael, was handling things well in their stead, but if there were any more sorcerers, it was likely going to be more than he could handle. And in that case, perhaps it was best to ask for more helpers.

"Well, Shax is the one who has it toughest on his 'envoy mission,'" Behemoth said, shrugging sympathetically.

"Huh? Is their job that hard?" Lilith asked.

She'd heard that the two had been ordered there as envoys while they were visiting Kuroka's old home, but Lilith hadn't been informed of the details. It didn't look like Behemoth was allowed to talk about it either.

"Well, he's got Lady Kuroka with him, so they'll manage one way or another," Behemoth added ambiguously. "At the very least, that's how the boss sees it, so he let the two of them go on their own."

"Behemoth, it's almost time," Levia said, pressing her head against his chest.

Before Lilith knew it, all the other sorcerers had already boarded.

"Oh, crap! Well, see you later. You too, Furcas," Behemoth said.

"Yeah! Good luck, you two!" Furcas yelled back.

Behemoth waved, then carried Levia like a princess and leaped onto the deck.

"S-So cool! I wanna try that too!"

"It's obviously out of the question," Lilith said. "The sailors are going to get angry real soon, you know? You can't board without a

ticket..."

"Aaah..."

They could hear angry shouting and Behemoth apologizing from the deck. This was Archdemon Zagan's domain. He was fundamentally a generous lord, but he provided no relief for wrongdoings. His general stance was, "go ahead and do it, but take responsibility yourself."

Zagan didn't go out of his way to dole out punishments, but he also didn't protect wrongdoers from getting punished by the citizens under his patronage. If they managed to escape, it would be the culprit's victory, but if they didn't, they'd be stuck paying the price. The penalty would be far stricter from the church too. A child stealing from others would be one thing, but it just wasn't worth committing crimes in this town.

Behemoth had probably wanted to act cool in front of Furcas, but he'd been rather thoughtless about it. A sudden thought then rose to the forefront of Lilith's mind.

I wonder what His Highness is up to...? It feels like he's been acting weird lately.

"What's up, Lilith? Why the long face?" Selphy asked.

"Hm? Oh, um...I'm just thinking..."

Lilith hesitated over whether she should discuss her thoughts with the others.

But I guess Selphy is fine.

Her carefree friend sometimes gave very pertinent advice.

"You know..." Lilith started, then cut right to the chase. "Lately, His Highness has been weirdly kind to me."

"My bro's always kind to everyone, though?" Furcas said, cocking his head.

"Well...I'm sure that's the case from your perspective," Lilith replied. "That's not what I mean. For example, he helped out this morning cleaning the kitchen, and yesterday, he helped get dinner ready too, right? I feel like a king really shouldn't be doing that..."

"Now that you mention it, he totally did," Selphy agreed. "Lilith, you don't drop plates and trip like I do, so if anything, I would've preferred for him to, like, help me instead."

"Don't you feel sad admitting that?" Lilith quipped.

Selphy smiled without a care in the world, either not considering it a problem or not understanding.

"I know he's not acting like he does around Lady Nephy or anything," Lilith continued. "Still, it's so sudden that I don't really get it."

His kindness actually made her anxious about whether she was guilty of something.

“I get it,” Selphy said, nodding. “Rather than being all flirty with Miss Nephy, it’s more like he’s doting on a little sister or cousin or something he hasn’t seen in a while. I totally get it.”

“Have you been looking at me like that, Selphy?”

“Hm...? No, I look at you as a woman.”

“Hwah? Uh, um... Is that so...?”

Lilith wasn’t quite sure how to interpret that. Selphy was being as carefree as usual, so the meaning behind those words was a total mystery. That said, she did have a point.

Is it because I’m a direct descendant of the Silver-Eyed King?

Zagan was apparently of the Silver-Eyed King’s lineage—from a fairly ancient age too. However, if that was the reason, he would have been acting the same toward Kuroka and Selphy.

Being treated so kindly without knowing the reason made her feel awkward, like she’d done something wrong. She groaned over that though when another boy came by the wharf. There weren’t supposed to be any more boats anchored here, though.

“Oh, Ain, short time no see!” Selphy said.

“Hey, Selphy, it’s been about three days. Want an apple?”

“Totally!”

He was apparently Selphy’s acquaintance. He had a paper bag in his arms from which he pulled out an apple and threw it to Selphy. Seeing the boy’s face, Lilith froze.

Silver...eyes?

The first thing that came to mind upon seeing his features was Zagan. He had silver eyes and black hair. He was dressed like a swordsman, giving him a completely different ambience, but his features and posture greatly resembled Zagan’s.

“Hello. Are you Selphy’s friends?” he asked, smiling gently as he noticed Lilith’s gaze.

“Oh, yes. I’m Lilith, and this is Furas.”

“Lilith...? Do you mean...Lilithiera?” the boy said, his eyes widening in surprise.

“Um...do you know me?” Lilith asked.

“No... I’m probably mistaking you for someone else. You’re similar to someone I know, so it caught me off guard.”

“Is that so...?”

The boy shook his head to pull himself back together, then put his hand to his chest.

“I’m Ain. I owe Selphy in many ways,” he said.

“Hm...? Did I, like, do anything?” Selphy asked.

“Ha ha ha, well, that’s part of your charm.”

“That so? You’re making me blush.”

They seemed rather close, but even so, the boy—Ain—was

focused entirely on Lilith.

“Something about Lilith bugging you?” Selphy asked curiously.

“I suppose so... Well, I guess I don’t mind telling you,” Ain muttered. “She couldn’t possibly be her, but my ‘daughter’ has a very similar name and features.”

This was a shocking truth, but Ain had chosen the hopelessly wrong person to confide in.

“A daughter! Ain, you’ve got a kid this big?!” Selphy exclaimed.

“How could he?!” Lilith yelled spontaneously. He looked no older than she did, after all.

“I mean, age and looks don’t really, like, apply to sorcerers, right?” Selphy said.

“Well, you have a point there, but...”

The boy smiled and pulled another apple out of his bag.

“You sure do get along,” he said. “Would you like one too?”

“Oh, thank you...”

“Thanks!”

Even Furcas accepted an apple and bit right into it. Watching this from the side, Selphy grinned as she started eating her own apple.

“Hey, Selphy, that’s immodest. You’re in public,” Lilith whispered.

She wasn’t going to ask Selphy to act with the elegance of a princess after all this time, but biting into an apple like that in public was still out of the question.

“Huh? I can’t?” Selphy asked curiously.

“I-It’s that bad?” Furcas joined in, having the exact same reaction.

Lilith put her hands to her head.

Are these two actually birds of a feather...?

“I’m happy so long as you like it,” Ain said, smiling as he watched Lilith sigh.

Selphy cocked her head. She still had some apple fragments around her lips, so Lilith used a handkerchief to wipe them off.

“Oh yeah, Ain, you’ve always got apples to give me, huh? Do you like apples?” Selphy asked.

“Me? Well, I don’t hate them, but I wouldn’t call them my favorite or anything.”

“Waaah? But you’re always buying them.”

“Now that you mention it, I suppose I am?” Ain said, a troubled look on his face. He was seemingly unaware of that fact until it was pointed out to him. After looking a little troubled by that for a little, he had a revelation and continued, “Maybe it’s because I want to see you enjoying a delicious apple?”

“Hmm...?”

Lilith’s face cramped upon hearing those words.

Huh? What does he mean by that?

Selphy was a carefree soul who always acted thoughtlessly, but she was still a beauty befitting the Neptunia royal line. Even Lilith's heart throbbed when she took a serious look at her, so there had to be at least one man out there who saw her favorably. Inside Lilith, an abnormal murky feeling crawled up her neck.

"Ain, isn't that the warm and fluffy feeling you get, like, when you feed a kitty or puppy?" Selphy asked, knitting her brow like she wasn't sure how to react.

"Oooh! I see! That's what this feeling is," Ain agreed. "You're right. When I watch you eating something delicious, it feels like all my worries don't even matter anymore."

"Is that supposed to, like, make me happy? Mad?"

"Hmm? I didn't mean it in a bad way."

Their mismatched exchange had Lilith tugging on Selphy's arm.

"H-Hey, Selphy? What's your relationship with this person?" she whispered.

"Ain? He's my friend!" Selphy answered proudly, ruining Lilith's consideration of being quiet.

"Selphy listens to my worries and such all the time," Ain said, nodding without looking particularly offended.

"All the time? Have we, like, met that much?" Selphy muttered, putting a finger to her lips as she tried to remember. "Umm, about once every two or three days? You listen to me grumble too, so that, like, makes us even."

"H-Huh...?"

Setting aside Lilith's bewilderment, Selphy smiled as if it was no big deal.

"I thought it was weird that you brought me apples every single time, but I never thought you were feeding me like an animal. Ha ha ha!"

"Heh heh heh, but I enjoyed it. Since I have you here, mind if I ask what you'd like to eat next time?"

"Oh, then I totally wanna try some ice cream! Mister Zagan apparently set it up so it can be made cheap with sorcery. That way, he can have it with Miss Nephy whenever!"

"What is that boy up to...?" Ain said, putting a hand to his head. He was apparently acquainted with Zagan as well.

"Oh, but the ice cream will melt by the time you get here," Selphy said. "Right! I can just come with you to buy it!"

"I wouldn't mind that. How about going right now?"

"Yeah! Do you two wanna come with us?"

"Stop! Selphy! Stop!" Lilith yelled, covering Selphy's mouth upon hearing her outlandish statement. "What are you thinking?! Doesn't he want to go shopping with just the two of you?"

“Mmmph... Huh? That so?”

They both took a glance at Ain, who smiled back.

“I don’t mind,” he said. “I’m interested in you too, Lilith.”

“Uhhh...?”

Ain appeared to more than welcome the idea, either being very magnanimous or not having those kinds of feelings to begin with. That was when Furcas cut in between him and Lilith.

“L-Lilith is a charming girl, but I don’t think you should say things like that!”

“Hm...? Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean it that way...” Ain paused there. A beat later, he realized what he’d said and corrected himself in a panic. “How do I put it...? It’s a little hard to explain, but judging by her name and appearance, I doubt she’s completely unrelated to my ‘daughter.’ I should’ve asked Alshiera about it.”

“D-Daughter...? Sh-Should I call you father, then?” Furcas said.

“Huh? Are you going out with Lilith?”

“I haven’t gotten an answer yet, but I’ve told her I love her!”

“Somehow...seeing you reminds me of a friend I made recently.”

A vein popped on Ain’s brow. Apparently, he didn’t really like this person despite calling him a friend. Ain shook his head to clear his mind, then turned to Lilith.

“Right, I’m pretty sure your father is someone else, but I believe I’m someone who has a duty to help you if you’re ever in trouble. I’m not sure how much use I can be, but do let me know if anything comes up. I don’t mind if you ask through Selphy.”

“Um, I don’t really get what you’re saying...?” Lilith said.

“I suppose you wouldn’t... I’m not entirely sure what I’m saying myself,” Ain replied, smiling bitterly as he pointed at his own head. “I’ve got someone else’s memories, you see. I don’t really know how much of it is mine and how much of it is his. However, I believe this someone may be related to you.”

“Is that something you really have to take responsibility for?” Lilith asked.

Ain nodded meekly and answered, “I suppose not. It might not be my responsibility, but it’d also feel bad to ignore it... It’s hard to explain, honestly.”

His wording felt very vague and uncertain, which got on Lilith’s nerves.

Furcas doesn’t even have memories and he has it more together than this!

He didn’t for a second worry about who he was. He always kept his eyes forward, far more than anyone else. Lilith folded her arms and puffed out her chest aggressively.

“I don’t really get it, but that’s what you call an unwelcome

favor,” she said. “The princess of the succubi hasn’t fallen so far that she’ll be pleased by the sympathy of someone who doesn’t even really know himself.”

“Eep... L-Lilith?” Furcas gulped fearfully. “H-He doesn’t seem to mean anything bad by it, so you don’t have to go that far...”

“It’s not gonna get through to him unless I make it clear, right?” Lilith said, thrusting a finger at Ain. “You hear me? I don’t know what’s got you so indecisive, but being human means being nobody but yourself, no matter how much you flounder.”

Lilith was the princess of the succubi. Her path had been determined since birth, so she would become the next queen of the Hypnoels. Naturally, the fetters of being a princess had sometimes weighed heavily on her.

When Selphy ran away from home and when Kuroka’s village was attacked, I couldn’t even chase them.

It had been so vexing that she’d considered throwing away the Hypnoel name to follow them.

The reason I didn’t do that is because I’m weak.

The moment she’d learned about the two of them going missing, Lilith had frozen in fear. Blaming her family for it had been no more than an excuse. Even if she wasn’t a Hypnoel, she probably would’ve done the same thing. That was why Lilith wanted to be someone who wouldn’t be ashamed before her two childhood friends. She wanted to make those two, who she would probably never see again, proud—though in the end, they’d reunited. She’d decided to become strong. That had been Lilith’s first step toward being Lilith.

“I can’t be anyone but myself?” Ain said, arching back as if he’d been dealt a heavy blow.

“That’s right. I don’t know anything about having someone else’s memories, but it’s foolish to be defined by that. I’m not me because I’m the princess of the succubi. I’m noble, so the princess of the succubi is a noble being.”

Lilith knew nothing about Ain’s circumstances, so maybe she was going off on a complete tangent.

But I’ll feel restless if I don’t at least get a word in!

This was what made Lilith who she was, so there was no helping it. As for Ain, for some reason, he opened his eyes wide, deeply moved as he stared at her.

“I can only be me...” he mumbled, then smiled as if suddenly unbound from something. “Allow me to take back what I said. You are a splendid person.”

“H-Hmph! So long as you understand!”

Lilith inadvertently turned to the side, and for some reason, the other two were nodding proudly with folded arms.

“Right?!” they both said in unison.

Why are you two so in sync?!

Aware that she was turning red to the cheeks, Lilith fanned her face quickly.

“Oops, I almost forgot,” Ain said with an amused smile. “What shall we do about the ice cream?”

“I’m totally going!” Selphy exclaimed. “Come on, join us, Lilith!”

“H-Huh?”

Lilith’s childhood friend tugged on her hand insistently, unable to read the mood.

I feel like I just acted really haughty, so what’s with this development?!

Ain didn’t seem to mind, but Lilith felt extremely awkward. And yet, there was one other person who couldn’t read the room.

“Let’s go, Lilith.”

“Jeez...”

Pulled by both hands, Lilith had no choice but to tag along with the group.

“Furcas, aren’tcha a bit too close?” Selphy protested. In the end, cold eyes glared at Furcas for some reason.

Chapter III: Misunderstandings Are Fun from the Outside, but Extremely Troublesome for Those Involved

“Long time no see, Barbatos.”

Several days after meeting Gremory, Vepar called Barbatos to the usual tavern. Vepar had planned to contact Barbatos sooner or later either way, but knowing how much of a pain the man could be, it'd taken some time for him to prepare himself despite this being a formal request.

Is my desire to defeat my teacher truly that pathetic?

He felt resentment toward Gremory for forcing this unreasonable demand on him, but it was his fault for not having the information on Asmodeus that Gremory was offering. It'd taken him a few days to convince himself of that fact while holed up in an inn room.

“Yo, long time no see, Vepar. Been about a year, yeah?” Barbatos said, raising a casual hand without having any way of knowing about Vepar's anguish. He then knit his brow. “Hey, you're looking kinda pale. You okay?”

“Ha ha, do I look bad enough for you to have to worry about me? Sorry about that. I can't see my own face.”

Vepar endured the impulse to shudder, blaming Barbatos for his troubles, and returned a frail smile. Vepar had severed his own sight, but his remaining senses and his sorcery were sharpened, allowing him to perceive his surroundings regardless.

His heightened senses naturally allowed him to read the flow of air on his skin and through his sense of smell. He was even capable of recognizing shapes based on sound. What the blind could do by touching an object to figure out its contour, Vepar could do by speaking and interpreting the sound that bounced back to him because of his own voice. It didn't matter if all sound was blocked or if someone hid themselves with genius levels of skill, Vepar was capable of seeing it all with his closed eyes. Well, he still couldn't go as far as reading a person's mind, though.

To think this man would show any consideration at all... He sure has changed.

It was as if he'd mellowed out or had calmed down. If this man was starting to become more human, then it was surely like watching

a patch of greenery sprout in the middle of a desert. And yet, Barbatos let out a vulgar laugh.

“Well, that’s ’cause you’ve got your eyes shut year round and can’t even look in a damn mirror. Hya ha ha!”

“I suppose people don’t change all that easily...”

In the end, Barbatos was Barbatos. Putting any hope in him was futile. Vepar was ashamed that he’d jumped to conclusions.

“Hm? What’s that?” Barbatos asked.

“I was just thinking about how there are people who can look into mirrors, yet still can’t see.”

“That so?”

Unable to understand the sarcasm in Vepar’s voice, Barbatos cocked his head curiously. After that, he slapped his back in an overly familiar manner.

“Anyway, never thought the helper Gremory mentioned was you... Well, here we are, so how ’bout a drink?”

“I’ll refrain,” Vepar replied, raising a hand. “I came to allow you to consult me today.”

It definitely wasn’t going to lead to anything good, so Vepar didn’t want to extend his stay with alcohol.

“Hah? You think I can’t talk after just a little booze?”

“When you drink, you tend to disappear for some reason. I’ve ignored you eating and running up until now, but it’d be troublesome if this request goes unfulfilled.”

“Why do you gotta treat me like I dine and dash all the time?”

“Place a hand on your heart and give it some thought.”

Barbatos did as he was told and placed a hand on his chest, but only came out looking more confused.

“Hm... I still don’t get it...”

“I see. Then I have just the right sorcery for you. It allows you to supplement your cerebral cortex from the outside. It was developed to treat amnesia, so I expect it’ll work wonders on you.”

“You think I’m an idiot or somethin’?”

“Hm? Do you even need to ask?”

Despite being sorcerers, these two were close enough to banter casually.

“Anyway,” Vepar said, brushing back his silver hair in irritation. “I’ve been hired to teach you how normal men and women spend time together. Quit complaining and just do as I say.”

“H-Haaah?! The hell do I gotta learn that shit from you? Don’t fuck with me.”

“You’re one to talk. How exactly do you plan on going out with the woman you have your heart set on?”

Upon hearing that, someone must’ve come to Barbatos’s mind, as

his eyes darted about in a fluster.

"I-I don't got my heart set on nobody...and I'm not going out with someone or nothin'."

Upon watching Barbatos being even more of a pain to deal with than usual, Vepar turned expressionless.

"A complete failure," Vepar said. "Is your heart in this at all?"

"I-I-I-It don't got nothing to do with you!"

"Do you think I'm taking on this futile endeavor because I want to?"

Vepar charged his words with the suffering he'd endured over the last few days, rendering Barbatos speechless. That was when he realized something.

Hang on. Is the Maiden of the Sacred Sword really all right with being courted by this guy?

He knew Barbatos had fallen for her, but he hadn't heard anything about Chastille's feelings on the matter. It'd slipped his mind because of all these rumors about them eloping. Thinking about it calmly, Vepar realized there was no way any woman out there would like this man. It was far more realistic for him to be courting her with one-sided feelings.

"Barbatos, there's one thing I'd like to ask. How are you related to the Maiden of the Sacred Sword?"

Even Vepar knew that asking, "Are you two going out?" would make things even more tiresome, so he wanted to be as roundabout as possible.

"What're you asking for?" Barbatos asked, making a meek expression and folding his arms.

"I'm the one asking questions here... Are you her guard? Her servant? You must be something, right?"

"Hah? Well, I *am* guarding her...and taking care of other stuff on her behalf too, I guess."

"Hmm. What, for example?"

For some reason, Barbatos puffed out his chest with pride.

"Well, ya know, when she klutzes out, I patch things up. Actually, without me around, she can't do nothin'. And yet, she sticks her neck into all sorts of crap, so I can't really keep my eyes off her."

After hearing that much, they sounded more like siblings, or workplace accomplices, than lovers.

This is awfully different from what Gremory told me...

"So you don't want to date her?" Vepar asked, wanting to be sure.

"H-Haaah?! Like hell a sorcerer and Angelic Knight can date!"

"So you draw the line there?"

In that case, perhaps they weren't in the kind of relationship Vepar had been worried about. Judging by his reaction, it was clear

that Barbatos was head over heels, but because she was an Angelic Knight, he'd maintained a respectful distance to watch over her.

How surprisingly manly.

After hearing that, though it was still a pain, Vepar wasn't entirely against the idea of helping. And just as he came to that conclusion...

"That damn crybaby. Her sleeping posture's horrible, so it's a huge pain fixing her sheets every night."

"Hm...?" Vepar mumbled, cocking his head. "Wait a minute. When you put it like that, it sounds like you sneak into her bedroom every night..."

"Don't make it sound like I'm some stalker! We're connected by the shadows, so I can always see, that's all. She talks in her sleep a ton too... I mean, I've gotta keep an eye out in case she gets attacked at night, so I've got no choice, yeah?"

"Always...? Meaning you're standing watch around the clock?"

"Hah? Well, duh! If I don't keep an eye out, then I've got no idea what kinda shit she's gonna start... Well, I'm a gentleman, so I at least spare her that when she's in the bath. Though, she's lacking in tits and ass and thighs, so it ain't like I'm missin' out on much."

Barbatos acted pretentious despite lacking the courage to peek at her. However, Vepar took that decisively mistaken statement at face value.

To be free to peek in on the bath and toilet all he wants... Even for a sorcerer, trampling over a person's dignity to such an extent is a bit much...

Vepar shuddered in fright. What's more, Barbatos had said that it was to "stop her from starting anything." To a sorcerer, the entirety of an Angelic Knight's duty could be categorized as such. In that case, he might have been threatening her so that she didn't do anything of the sort. Considering the personality of the sorcerer known as Barbatos, he would obviously resort to such dastardly means.

Vepar then remembered the elopement rumors. In the middle of the battle against an army of ten thousand led by Shere Khan, Barbatos had brazenly stolen Chastille away right before the knights' eyes.

Was that him seriously abducting her, then?

Had it then been interpreted as them eloping because, in the end, she'd returned and the situation had then developed to look like the Maiden of the Sacred Sword had accepted Barbatos? However, if he was always following her around from the shadows and threatening her, then perhaps she had no way of defying him. Moreover, to Barbatos, it wasn't much of a difference to confine her or let her be free. After all, he was always watching from the shadows. It made Vepar want to vomit. And next, Barbatos was going to make a move on her birthday...

I don't give a damn how and where an Angelic Knight dies, but it goes against my principles to ignore this!

Vepar's objective had changed. As a fellow victim, he couldn't possibly abandon her. He didn't know what the Maiden of the Sacred Sword's true feelings were, but Vepar didn't believe anyone in the world could possibly like Barbatos. As such, he would protect her. At the very least, he wished to prevent her from going through anything worse.

If nothing else can be done about it, I'll have no choice but to kill Barbatos.

In all likelihood, he would have to put his life on the line. Barbatos was a despicable man, but he was the sorcerer who was currently closest to becoming an Archdemon.

Having no way of knowing that Chastille wasn't as dissatisfied as she let on, Vepar came to that conclusion. Considering Barbatos's habitual behavior and how untrustworthy he was, this was a natural outcome. And showing no signs of noticing Vepar's heroic determination, Barbatos made an idiotic expression of confusion.

"Anyway, what do you even want me to do?" he asked. "Just so you know, I've never done nothin' to attract a woman."

"Oh, you don't have to worry about that. I know that without you telling me."

"You picking a fight?"

Vepar sighed as if he was talking to a monkey.

"I mean, do you even know?" Barbatos asked, ruffling his hair.

"Um, about how to celebrate someone's birthday, I mean."

Vepar raised an eyebrow at the unexpected question.

Can the desire to celebrate someone else's birthday sprout in scum like this...?

It didn't sound possible, but even if he was a fiendish stalker, if he possessed such feelings somewhere inside him, perhaps it would be possible to free...well, if not free, then maybe Vepar would be able to guide things so that the Maiden of the Sacred Sword didn't need to suffer more than she already had.

To that end, I have to start by getting him to trust me.

As such, Vepar acted normal and pretended to be cordial.

"Let's see... If you want to delight the person in question, you must first put in enough effort so that you don't displease them."

That felt like an awfully low standard, but in this man's case, there was a need to educate him from the very beginning onward. Vepar felt like it was far too late already, but if he gave up now, nobody would save the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. Thus, he had no choice but to do it. And yet, Barbatos looked astonished.

"Huh? Why do I gotta fuss over someone who's gonna get all pissy

on their own?"

Vepar jammed his staff into Barbatos's shin as hard as he could.

"Gaaah! The hell was that for?!" Barbatos roared in anger.

"Didn't you want to celebrate the Maiden of the Sacred Sword's birthday?" Vepar asked, making an expression like he was looking at filth. "I thought that was rather admirable of you, so why are you trying to anger the person in question? No, setting aside angering her, do you plan on making amends if you make her cry?"

Taking care to act like he saw Barbatos in a better light, Vepar scolded the man. His argument made sense, but Barbatos raised his voice in indignation.

"Haaah?! The crybaby gets angry and cries all the damn time!"

"You really are the worst... Do you make her cry that often?"

Vepar reeled back, forgetting to keep up the act.

Maybe I should just kill him right here and now.

It would mean annulling his contract with Gremory, but Vepar felt like something more important would be lost if Barbatos was left at large.

I don't want to become like Asmodeus.

Vepar had the nastiest sorcerer in the world for a teacher, and hence had a horrible example to learn from.

"I don't make her cry! Even when I don't do nothin', she...cries? I make her...cry?" Barbatos mumbled, then suddenly clawed at his hair and crouched down. "Hnnngh..."

"Wh-What's wrong...?"

"It's not like making her cry means anything, yeah? So...why can't I stand it...?"

It seemed he was writhing in agony after imagining he was making her cry.

What exactly is the Maiden of the Sacred Sword to him?

Barbatos seemed emotionally unstable. Honestly, he was such a pain that it far surpassed Vepar's imagination, but he couldn't understand why that was the case.

"...ease," Barbatos muttered incoherently, falling to his knees.

"What was that?"

"Please...teach me how to keep her from crying."

The outlandish formality and courtesy almost had Vepar opening his sealed eyes on accident. For some reason, Barbatos had thrown away every last scrap of his pride.

"If you brood over it that much, why do you constantly insult her?" Vepar asked, taken aback by his behavior.

"I don't get it either."

"On your feet," Vepar said, looking astonished, but still holding out a hand. "Let me say this once more. I've come here to provide you

with advice. If you're intent on accepting it, I'll help you."

Well, judging by the fact that Barbatos had to see the Maiden of the Sacred Sword on her birthday, misfortune was going to find the poor girl. But at the very least, perhaps Vepar could make the wound just a little shallower.

"Thanks..." Barbatos replied, taking Vepar's hand. Had he ever voiced such honest gratitude before? That was apparently how driven against the wall Barbatos was right now. After all...

"I still haven't decided what to send the crybaby on her birthday. Help me out."

Vepar wanted to take back everything he said, but he held his tongue using the willpower of a former Archdemon candidate. Instead, he pointed something else out.

"I doubt this is true, but you can't possibly be calling her 'crybaby' to her face all the time, right...?"

"Huh? The crybaby's a crybaby. What's wrong with calling her that?"

Vepar was shocked at how much that knowledge pained his heart, despite being a sorcerer.

No matter how you look at it, isn't the Maiden of the Sacred Sword far too pitiful?

Maybe it really was best to choke the life out of this man right now, but the request Vepar had undertaken was to teach this idiot how to be in a proper relationship. It felt like that was impossible, but if Vepar gave up, someone's life would be ruined, so he couldn't possibly retreat now.

"You may not know this, but that's an insult," Vepar explained patiently. "If you'd like her to favor you, I recommend you refrain from calling her that."

"I-I ain't tryin' to get no favor or nothin'!"

"Enough of that."

I wonder if there's a ring out there that can electrocute someone every time they say something stupid...

Something of the like might have existed in Asmodeus's treasury, but Vepar cursed not having it on hand.

Unfortunately for him, Vepar was unaware that this was nothing but the beginning of the misfortune that was soon to befall him.



"Chastille, I have something to... Hm? Rachel?"

Nephy and Nephteros dropped by Chastille's office. They wanted to consult with her about the matter with the Sacred Swords. The meeting the other day had ended in an indefinite state due to Archdemon Eligor—one of the sorcerers under Marchosias's umbrella

—entering Kianoides.

Zagan had already started researching Raphael and Richard's Sacred Swords. Due to that, Richard had stayed behind in Archdemon Palace. Still, there had to be something Nephy was capable of doing too, so with that thought in mind, she'd gone to ask Chastille's opinion.

After knocking on the door, Nephteros opened it without waiting for a reply, but instead of finding Chastille, Nephy only saw an unfamiliar nun. She was apparently acquainted with Nephteros. The nun opened her mouth in surprise, but no words came out.

"Are you Chastille's colleague?" Nephy asked, finding her reaction strange.

"Oh, is this your first time meeting her, Nephelia?" Nephteros asked as if the thought had slipped her mind.

"Yes, I believe so," Nephy answered.

"This girl is Rachel. She takes care of Chastille's everyday needs. She'll be promoted from an apprentice to a nun at the end of the month, so I'm sure Chastille will be even more indebted to her."

"Um, um, Nephteros? Her nose is bleeding..."

Blood had dribbled out of Rachel's nose even as Nephteros introduced her. The handkerchief she was using to hold it back was dyed bright red in the blink of an eye.

"Jeez, again...? Are you all—? Eek!"

This apparently happened a lot. Nephteros handled her with familiarity, but in an instant, a red spray shot out into the air. It seemed she was bleeding from the nose even more.

Nephteros...you really do have a problem with blood now.

She'd gotten back to her feet, but Nephteros had witnessed Richard's heart being gouged out in front of her eyes. It was clear to Nephy that the sight of blood had scared her ever since.

Nephteros held out her own handkerchief, and Rachel shook her head as she pulled out a second one.

"Sorry. I'm fine," Rachel stated, pinching her nose and returning a smile.

"You don't look fine..." Nephteros muttered in response.

After somehow holding back the red tide, Rachel smiled in satisfaction.

"My body simply failed to keep up with my faith. There's no need for you to be concerned."

"Is that a thing?" Nephteros asked.

"Faith is so very beautiful and pure. When I touch upon it, this happens."

The nun's eyes shined with the suspicious light of a religious fanatic. It did look like the two were acquaintances, but Nephy felt a

sudden anxiety that her precious little sister was being indoctrinated into a weird cult.

Noticing her gaze, Rachel waved her hands in a fluster and said, "Oh, please be at ease. To me, Lady Nephteros is an object of worship. However, her grandeur is far too much for me to bear, so my fits come to the fore in her presence! That's all!"

The nun unleashed a sequence of terrifyingly concerning words.
Is Chastille having trouble reigning in the Unification Faction...?

Perhaps some sort of internal strife had given rise to another strange faction? Whatever the case, Nephy felt that her best friend and little sister were both in grave danger.

"Faith... What do you mean by that?" Nephy asked, prepared for this to come to a fight in the worst case.

"Umm, well, there are things in this world that are so beautiful that they can only be described as miracles from God," Rachel said with an unexpectedly serious expression. "I simply wish to watch over them from nearby, like a stain on the wall or a weed on the roadside."

It was becoming even more impossible to understand her, but the way she acted reminded Nephy of a certain someone, so she managed to figure out what was going on.

I see. She's the same as Miss Gremory and Manuela...

Nephy had always found it odd that Manuela had never made Chastille her toy, but it seemed someone else was already in charge of her. Even Nephteros had become her target, so this girl probably already knew about Nephteros's relationship with Richard. Nephy regained her composure with an air of resignation. Seeing that, Nephteros got back to making introductions.

"Rachel, this is Nephelia. She's my older sister. She's big bro's... Archdemon Zagan's romantic partner, and also Chastille's good friend."

"Please call me Nephy, Miss Rachel," Nephy said, smiling gently and performing a curtsy.

"S-So this is the Source of Love Power the witch lady spoke of...!"

Nephy's smile twitched when she heard the weird title that'd been given to her.

"Oh! Sorry," Rachel said, raising her voice as she snapped out of her trance. "How could I forget? I'll get some tea ready right away."

"Oh, please don't mind us," Nephy replied.

She was usually the one preparing and serving tea, so she felt sorry and embarrassed to have others do it for her.

"By the way," Nephteros said, tilting her head curiously. "Is Chastille absent? Or rather, should you really just be sitting there?"

Rachel was sitting at Chastille's desk. She was also dressed in Chastille's official garments, making it look like she was playing dress-

up. After having that pointed out, Rachel put a hand to her chest and returned a ferocious smile like some brave veteran who'd served in many wars.

"Sitting in Lady Chastille's seat while wearing Lady Chastille's clothes... Heh, I surely wouldn't have been able to withstand this half a year ago. However, I haven't only been having nosebleeds all this time."

"That's not what I'm talking about..."

It turned out that Nephteros couldn't really get a conversation going with her either. Rachel wiped another dribble of blood from her nose with her thumb, then puffed out her chest.

"Actually, I've been entrusted to serve as Lady Chastille's substitute!"

"Her substitute...?"

"Oh, for Lord Barbatos's shadow, you mean," Nephy said.

The wriggling shadow at Rachel's feet was woven of sorcery. Normally, this would have been attached to Chastille, but that wasn't the case at present.

"She swapped the target of that shaggy's sorcery to another?" Nephteros asked, wide-eyed. "Chastille, you've improved your skills once again..."

"Hee hee, she was pretty amazing when she saved you too, Nephteros," Nephy added.

She'd even unleashed the power of the seraph within the Sacred Sword, the same technique Andrealphus had once used in Liucaon.

If not for Chastille, I'm sure Nephteros wouldn't have been saved.

"That girl always pushes herself too far," Nephteros stated, averting her eyes and turning red to the cheeks, perhaps faintly remembering that moment.

Nephy then came to a sudden realization and whispered something to Rachel.

"Um, if you're acting as Chastille's body double, doesn't that mean we should keep the fact that she isn't here a secret?"

"Y-You're right," Rachel said, covering her mouth in a panic. "Did I mess up...?"

Nephy observed the shadow.

I'm sure he can hear our conversation, but it looks like he hasn't noticed yet.

Perhaps that meant Barbatos had his focus elsewhere.

"It seems he hasn't noticed yet, so it's fine," Nephy explained quietly.

Rachel sighed in relief.

"But what is Chastille up to?" Nephteros whispered.

"She went to bring Mister Barbatos back because he's about to be

snatched away by a bad person!” Rachel exclaimed with an amused laugh.

“You’re not making any sense,” Nephteros quipped.

Nephy, on the other hand, somehow understood.

“Oh, the matter the other day with...Eligor, was it? Is it related to her?” Nephy asked.

“Yes! Exactly!”

It was a mystery why a simple nun would know of the internal affairs of sorcerers, but Rachel’s voice seemed to assert just how well-informed she was.

“Sorry, Nephelia, I’ll be staying here,” Nephteros said with a sigh. “Kuroka’s not here either, so the office work is going to get out of control.”

Nephteros had been away from the church over the last month due to the matter of her lifespan and Azazel, so she hadn’t been helping with office work. What’s more, Kuroka was currently away from Kianoides, so there was already a mountain of papers piled on Chastille’s desk.

“Understood. I’ll go check on how Chastille is doing,” Nephy replied.

None of these girls were aware that, completely unrelated to Eligor, both Barbatos and Chastille found themselves in an extremely tiresome situation.

“What am I even doing...?”

Around the time Nephy and Nephteros were visiting her office in the church, Chastille was out and about in town. She hid in the shadows a small distance away from Barbatos and wasn’t wearing Anointed Armor, but instead dressed in casual clothes. Passersby stared at her, but she showed no signs of noticing.

“That idiot Barbatos got seduced by a certain woman.”

A few days had passed since then. Chastille had been secretly checking on Barbatos since. It wasn’t that she distrusted him, of course. She truly believed in him. Or at least, she wanted to. However, just as Zagan had pointed out, it was also true that Barbatos tended to suddenly do astoundingly foolish things.

Actually, is Barbatos maybe really experienced with women...?

Thinking back on it, Chastille knew nothing about him. She knew he was an exceptionally talented sorcerer, and despite cursing all the time, he often helped and was good at looking after others. He probably saw Chastille as a woman too...maybe. However, when it came to his past, she knew nothing more than him being Zagan’s unsavory friend.

No, it’s enough to know Barbatos as he is now, isn’t it?

That should have been the case. And yet, no matter how much she

convinced herself of this, she couldn't help but worry.

I ended up acting like I suspect him...

If he found out, maybe it would hurt him. After all, if he doubted Chastille the same way, she would surely be sad.

And yet, I still want to know. How arrogant...

She knew this, but couldn't help herself. And so, she'd finally resorted to tailing Barbatos. It hadn't been easy to accomplish, though. Everything she did was constantly exposed to the shadow. He could see if he turned his attention to it, and he always listened. In a sense, Chastille was under constant surveillance.

"No, I don't think I'm really under surveillance..." Chastille muttered to herself, making excuses to nobody in particular.

At any rate, it might've been possible to destroy the shadow with the power of her Sacred Sword, but if she did, he would definitely notice. It would be extremely difficult to cut it to begin with, Sacred Sword or not. It would probably be impossible for the lower-ranked newcomers among the Archangels. Despite all this, Barbatos showed no signs of noticing that he was being followed.

It's a good thing Kuroka told me how to overcome his abilities.

Kuroka Adelhide didn't trust Barbatos in the slightest. Worried about him being Chastille's guard, she'd taught Chastille how to overcome his shadow manipulation abilities just in case she needed to know. This method left the shadow intact and simply detached it from her.

It was a sword technique from Liucaon called the blade of life or death. A true master could slash someone without them even recognizing they'd been cut, and the same could be applied to inanimate objects and even sorcery. The original goal was to cut someone without killing them, a terrifying technique that didn't scratch even a single cell.

If used properly, it could sever Barbatos's shadow without him noticing. Kuroka had instructed Chastille how to do that right before leaving for Liucaon.

"At your level, you should definitely be able to do it, Lady Chastille."

Barbatos was currently the closest sorcerer to being an Archdemon. Breaking his shadow would be extremely difficult for any average Angelic Knight or even the former Archdemon candidates. However, that same shadow was now staying behind, far away in Chastille's office.

The full power of the third-ranked Archangel, Chastille Lillqvist, even surpassed the strength of the sorcerer closest to becoming an Archdemon. However, Kuroka had one more thing to say.

"You'll probably only be able to pull this off once."

Even though she'd severed his shadow without him noticing, if he

peeked inside, he'd realize Chastille wasn't there right away. She was managing to trick him now by having Rachel dress up and pretend to be her. That wasn't likely to last long, however, which was why Chastille had waited until she was certain before doing this.

I didn't end up finding him the day Zagan told me, after all.

Besides, she hadn't been able to ignore her duties. She'd kept telling herself that she'd been "on duty," desperately acting like everything was normal. Today, Barbatos had looked unsteady...or in a fluster. He'd left the office acting differently from usual, so Chastille had gambled that this was the right time to act.

Well, Barbatos's behavior was easy to understand. Chastille had completely forgotten that her own birthday was in a week. He still had no idea what to get her for a present, so Vepar's invitation was akin to divine providence.

Chastille caught her breath, then peered around the corner Barbatos had taken. And just as expected, he was with...

"A ridiculously beautiful woman?!"

Someone abnormally beautiful with silver hair stood by his side. Having unintentionally raised her voice, Chastille covered her mouth in a panic. Fortunately, Barbatos was shaken about something and hadn't noticed. Somehow managing to calm down, Chastille took another look his way.

The woman was a sorcerer who was wearing a long robe and holding a staff. She looked somewhere around twenty, her posture the very picture of elegance, and her eyes remained closed the entire time.

She matches Zagan's description.

Chastille couldn't hear what they were discussing, but Barbatos looked very close to the sorcerer. Just then, the silver-haired sorcerer covered her mouth with the sleeve of her robe and smiled gracefully.

Chastille gulped. This was what people meant when they compared a smile to a blooming flower. In terms of lineage, Chastille was technically a noble, but ever since she'd been chosen by the Sacred Sword, she'd devoted everything to her swordsmanship. As a fallen noble, such mannerisms were impossible for her to perform no matter how hard she tried. This sorcerer was clearly on an entirely different level. Chastille trembled violently, and perhaps noticing her gaze, the sorcerer suddenly turned her way.

"What?!"

Chastille's face froze, and the sorcerer's lovely features were suddenly highlighted by a beautiful smile.

Sh-She laughed at me?!

Was she saying that an Amazon wasn't a worthy opponent? Chastille shuddered in humiliation, and the sorcerer reached a hand for Barbatos's face, pulling his unkempt hair tight behind his head.

Sh-She's touching...his hair?

Even Chastille had never touched his hair. What's more, she hadn't even imagined touching him with such familiarity.

She's more beautiful than me, and closer to him...

How could Chastille possibly win? Despite keenly realizing that, for some reason, she didn't even think of running back to her office.

What is this feeling...?

She didn't want to lose. In that instant, Chastille felt antagonism toward someone for the very first time in her life.



“A present... I just don't get it. What's the right thing to pick? Something that'll definitely delight the crybaby... Something to delight her...? Delight... What's that word mean? What's a delight...?” Barbatos muttered incoherently as he stared through a display window. Vepar backed away from him a little.

He's like a beast learning about the human heart for the first time...

In that case, was Vepar's role to be the hunter who persecuted and killed the beast? He really wanted to. And just as the pure tedium of this task started turning into bloodlust...

“A ridiculously beautiful woman?! ”

Vepar's ears picked up a scream. Without even turning toward it, he was able to identify the voice's owner.

Is that the Maiden of the Sacred Sword?

Barbatos didn't seem to notice due to his lousy state, but Chastille was hiding around the corner so that they couldn't see her. Vepar was astonished by this fact.

If Barbatos hasn't noticed, does that mean she broke his shadow by herself?

Vepar couldn't even imagine how such a thing could be accomplished. It was probably the work of the Sacred Sword, whose power he knew very little about. Still, the important thing was that she'd escaped his shadow all on her own.

So she managed to get away from him, huh?

Because Vepar had called him out, Barbatos's focus had been diverted from the Maiden of the Sacred Sword. Chastille hadn't overlooked this opportunity. The fact that she was here now was because she'd unluckily run to exactly where he was.

She looks so frightened... How pitiful.

Chastille seemed to be covering her mouth so as not to make any noise, trembling violently all the while. She even had tears in her eyes. Seeing her in such a sad state, Vepar's conclusion only made sense. That was why he secretly flashed her a smile.

Be at ease. I'm your ally. I'll protect you from this scum as best I can.

Did his intentions get through to her? The fear he sensed from her was far too strong, so he couldn't read her minute expressions. Vepar felt irrepressible sympathy for her because of this.

I'll attract this idiot's attention so that it's easier for you to get away.

This was Barbatos. He would eventually capture her with his shadow again, but Vepar could at least delay the inevitable.

If she chooses to fight, I don't mind lending her a hand either.

Putting a wielder of a Sacred Sword in his debt would prove useful in his fight against Asmodeus, after all. Taking all that into consideration, Vepar struck up a conversation with Barbatos to attract his attention.

"Barbatos. Shouldn't you consider your appearance before worrying about a present?"

"Huh? Why's a guy gotta worry about his appearance? Makes me wanna puke."

Vepar endured the urge to punch the man and complain that he was the one who made Vepar want to puke.

"You're supposed to be smart, so why do you act so foolish?" Vepar asked, rebuking him instead. "If you want a woman to like you, you must put in the effort first."

"Why're you saying stuff like Zagan?"

"You...even bothered Archdemon Zagan with this?"

Vepar didn't think it was possible, but perhaps that great Archdemon had been made to go through this tiresome process already. Vepar felt unexpected sympathy and compassion for a total stranger.

"Don't say I bothered him! It like...just kinda happened?"

"You really are insufferable..."

Watching Barbatos clutch his chest in a crestfallen manner, Vepar couldn't help but sigh. He then went around Barbatos and pulled back his annoyingly unkempt hair.

If I get his back turned, she can take that chance to run away.

And yet, Chastille remained frozen and showed no signs of moving. Well, even if she was a wielder of a Sacred Sword, she was still just a young girl of seventeen or eighteen. Faced with the one who'd terrorized her for so long, it was unreasonable to expect her to be able to take action so suddenly. And with no way of noticing what was going through Vepar's mind, Barbatos wearily pulled a ribbon out from his pocket.

"What? This really enough?" he said, holding his hair up on his own and tying it together with unexpected efficiency.

"If you're capable, why don't you do this normally?"

"Like I can bother going through the hassle every single day."

That said, his gloominess had faded enough for Vepar to feel a

little more at ease.

"Can you do something about your face while you're at it?" Vepar asked.

"You may not know this, but people are stuck with the face they're born with!" Barbatos screamed in tears. It was true that his face was annoying to look at, but perhaps Vepar had phrased his complaints poorly.

"Oh, I mean the unhealthy look you have. Can you at least do something about those bags under your eyes?"

"Huh? Oh yeah, I guess I haven't really been sleeping lately, have I?"

"I think the problem is more fundamental than that... Whatever. Take this, it's a pill made of the concentrated vitality of the forest. It should improve your complexion somewhat. Howe—"

"Man, you've got something real handy there, huh?"

Without waiting for Vepar to finish, Barbatos snatched the pill and threw it into his own mouth.

"However, it's slightly toxic and addictive. Still, you'll probably be fine."

"How can you look so calm while making me take something so dangerous?!"

"You're the one who didn't let me finish."

Despite his current behavior, Barbatos was the closest sorcerer to becoming an Archdemon. He could easily manipulate the chemicals in his brain to neutralize the toxins. Even Vepar admired his skill in that respect.

He's a top-notch sorcerer, but...

He really was intolerable as a person. At any rate, this was a drug Vepar had made personally. Barbatos's face gained noticeable vitality, and the shadows under his eyes vanished cleanly.

"Hmm. Well, better than before," Vepar said. "Now, if you take off that unfashionable robe, you'll look far less repulsive."

"Do you hate me that much?"

"Do you actually want me to answer that question?"

"What's so fun about hurting my feelings?"

That said, it was unreasonable to ask a sorcerer to remove their robe. Vepar wasn't being serious, but Barbatos took it off without any hesitation.

"This fine?" he asked.

"You really took it off?"

"You're the one who told me to!" Barbatos shouted, then ruffled his hair and muttered, "That ass Zagan told me to invite her to a meal or something the day of."

Vepar had heard that Zagan and Chastille were allies, so this was

most unexpected.

Well, I suppose to an Archdemon, a wielder of a Sacred Sword is nothing more than a nuisance.

And yet, he'd never even imagined what Barbatos would say next.

"Don't it feel like a sorcerer walking around with an Angelic Knight while totally undisguised is a horrible idea?"

"Why are you capable of understanding that while not understanding everything that comes before it?"

Vepar pointed that out on reflex, feeling suddenly moved.

He actually sounded like an upstanding person for once!

In that case, Vepar would've preferred him to stop stalking the poor girl and enter a proper relationship, but that was probably aiming too high.

"Still, I can't use any sorcery like this..." Barbatos mumbled, reconsidering as he folded his arms. "Oh well, it's a bit of a pain, but I guess I'll use these."

After muttering to himself, Barbatos pulled out some small metal beads. The beads each had a tiny pin sticking out of them.

"Hmm, amulet earrings? Looks like they weren't made that small, but were compressed down from a larger size using sorcery. I must say, that's quite the amusing creation."

Barbatos's sorcery was charged within the many amulets dangling from his neck, so he could discharge them to immediately unleash his sorcery on the spot. This man was apparently good at delicate craftsmanship, which didn't suit his face at all. Vepar personally used charms, but it still would have been very difficult for him to imitate this kind of handiwork.

"Heh heh heh, if you like it that much, want me to make some for you?" Barbatos asked, seemingly in a good mood after being praised.

"Hmm. What are you scheming?"

"Why'd you gotta suspect me of something for no reason at all?!" Barbatos wailed, making a face like he was hurt by Vepar's words.

"Can't you do exactly that for the Maiden of the Sacred Sword?" Vepar replied in astonishment.

"That's it! Man, you're smart."

"I'm starting to get anxious, though..."

Perhaps he'd said too much.

It seems unpleasant to get earrings from a man you don't even like...

Still, handmade jewelry from a sorcerer could be sold for a considerable sum. Vepar didn't know if the Maiden of the Sacred Sword was capable of being that shrewd, but it was better than him giving her some weird food or something.

"Well, at first, I thought of making her food or something, but for some reason, that ass Zagan was against the idea."

“Hmm, Archdemon Zagan truly is wise. I’d like to meet him.”

“If I set up a meeting, will you stop insulting me?”

“How upsetting. Citing the truth isn’t an insult.”

“I thought you’d say that!”

If he was aware of that, then he was better off fixing his own lifestyle, but being a sorcerer meant being blind to that fact. Vepar nonchalantly ignored him when Barbatos remembered he still had those earrings in his hand.

“I hate using these ’cause they hurt to put on, though...”

With that, Barbatos stabbed a pin into his ear. Blood obviously spurted out. Vepar was so astonished he couldn’t say anything. Mustering his willpower, he shook his head and cast healing sorcery.

“Why are you so foolish? You’re supposed to make a hole for an earring beforehand. I stemmed the bleeding for now, but don’t blame me if your ear gets infected.”

Vepar finished the treatment before his clothes got dirty. Barbatos was probably going to complain about it hurting when he pulled them out next, but sooner or later, the hole was going to stick and he could put on the earrings without bleeding.

“I don’t usually use them,” Barbatos said, shrugging. “That’s why the holes close up right away.”

“Then use them enough for the holes to settle. You want to hide your outward appearance as a sorcerer, right?”

“Well...you’ve got a point there,” Barbatos mumbled to himself like he couldn’t really accept it. Still, after putting a few earrings in one ear, he looked surprisingly like a regular civilian.

Depending on how things are done, people can change beyond recognition.

Vepar honestly admired that, but even after he’d bought this much time, Chastille had yet to show any signs of moving.

Oh well, I suppose we’ll move elsewhere.

Left with no way of knowing he was being misunderstood as her love rival, Vepar started walking so that he could save Chastille.



“Why do they have to show off so much...?”

Watching the two of them, Chastille was left in a state of extreme shock. They were flirting right before her eyes, tying up his hair intimately and even changing his clothes. The sorcerer had even noticed Chastille’s presence before doing all this.

The two looked close, so Chastille felt like she was learning about a Barbatos she didn’t know, but they didn’t have to go so far as to show off and cling to each other like that.

Vepar was actually very reluctantly attracting Barbatos’s attention

away from Chastille, but unfortunately, none of that was getting across to her.

He's never dressed like that in front of me!

Not that she really minded Barbatos as he was, of course. Chastille had never wanted him to change or anything. However, setting that aside, seeing him do things in front of another woman that he didn't do in front of her made her feel a sense of defeat, or maybe a sense of loss. It was a very strange emotion.

It was something like, "That's mine, but a stranger is using it without asking." As she agonized over that emotion, it was Barbatos who acted boldly.

He's putting on ear ornaments!

They seemed to be painful decorations that pierced the ear with little needles. And honestly, they looked pretty good on Barbatos.

This is so unfair! He's never shown me anything like that!

She couldn't explain what exactly was unfair about it, but Chastille puffed up her cheeks with tears in her eyes. Despite losing her temper so much, the choice of forcing her way in between them was nonexistent. After all, no matter who it was, she couldn't possibly do something to interrupt what looked like a fun time. In that case, she was better off not tailing them, but she couldn't do that either for some reason.

She knew she was contradicting herself, but she had no idea what to do. Just then, what resonated in her heart were the words of that noble girl who was similar to her.

"But desire is different. You want to know more about them, to have them with you."

Chastille's forehead slammed into a signboard.

Then this feeling inside me is...?

It wasn't that she hadn't realized this. It'd just been too big for her to honestly accept and was far too thorny for her to swallow. She put her hands to her head and agonized over it...when the silver-haired sorcerer reached a hand out to Barbatos's face.

Aaah! She's even touching his ear!

Chastille felt like she was watching something that she really shouldn't, much like that time Zagan had touched Nephy's ear so very long ago. The act wasn't even really done between people who were intimate. And yet, that sorcerer had done it so casually.

Vepar was actually just treating Barbatos because he'd stabbed his own ear without thinking about it, but that wasn't what it looked like to Chastille at all. Chastille ground her teeth, and then the sorcerer started leading Barbatos away by the hand.

That's totally a date! I haven't even done anything like that! It's so unfair!

And upon thinking that, she came to a sudden realization.

“Do I want to go on a date with Barbatos...?”

She tried imagining walking around with him. Much like Zagan and Nephy, walking hand in hand through town, having some sweet food, picking out clothes for each other, then getting teased that it didn't suit her and getting angry at him...

H-Huh? I can't picture anything but us fighting a lot...

In other words, Chastille and Barbatos would never end up like them. Barbatos rarely came out of the shadows to begin with, and when he did, it was a matter of course for him to tease her and for it to turn into a fight. What's more, pretty much the only relationship of note in Chastille's surroundings was Zagan's and Nephy's, and their daughter feared they were in danger of making no progress even after a thousand years. Having devoted all of her efforts to swinging a sword, Chastille didn't possess the imagination necessary to picture something she'd never witnessed before.

Calling that l-love is...far too presumptuous.

Based on the fact that she was acting like this, there was no doubting her feelings. However, she couldn't imagine any future related to it.

What the heck is love?!

She had no idea what to do, but for some reason, she couldn't remain still. How was she supposed to calm her raging heart? It felt like she was just suffering.

Does Barbatos feel this way too...?

That was when Chastille came to a sudden realization.

“Huh? Now that I really think about it, Barbatos has never said he likes me or anything, has he...?”

The fact that he might be in love with Chastille had been nothing more than Nephteros's conjecture. Her only other circumstantial evidence to work off of was that it'd kind of felt that way, so Chastille couldn't deny it if anyone told her it was just a misunderstanding.

She'd been so happy to get that butterfly ornament from him. However, thinking back on that, all he'd said was, “Try looking a little more like a woman,” so could she really consider it a present?

Maybe...I'm just getting in high spirits about being in love...?

Chastille only knew the sides of Barbatos that he showed her, so she couldn't view him objectively.

Tell me, Nephy. Am I unable to become like you two...?

Chastille fell to her knees in shock, unable to give chase as Barbatos and the sorcerer walked away.



“I wonder if Chastille is all right?”

Nephy had gone out into the streets of Kianoides. She'd approved of Gremory's plan to light a fire under her best friend, but she had a premonition that things were going in a completely unimaginable direction.

Master Zagan has been leaving them alone because things are liable to get worse if they're prodded the wrong way.

The need had arisen to give them that slight push on the back, which was why he was meddling now. It was too late to say anything at this point in time, but perhaps Nephy should've stopped him. And so, using the power of Zagan's barrier to find her, just as Nephy was about to reach Chastille's location...

"Huh?"

"Oh?"

...she came across a woman with charms sealing her eyes.

"You're Astrologian Eligor, correct?"

"And you're Fairy Queen Nephelia, was it?"

These two were polar opposites. The pure-white hair of a high elf contrasted pitch-black hair that went down to the waist. Having removed her apron, Nephy wore a modest white dress that didn't show any skin. Conversely, Eligor wore a jet-black outfit from Liucaon that glamorously hung over her shoulders, exposing her ample cleavage. One wore a chainless metal collar, while the other wore a chained leather collar.

Having suddenly crossed paths, the two Archdemons simply stared at each other in silence. The first to break it was Eligor.

"Would you like to join me for tea? I've always wanted to speak to you."

That was quite the bold proposal to make while she was in the middle of trying to solicit Barbatos to their cause. Nephy collected herself quietly.

I can't possibly leave Chastille alone, but...

Honestly, Nephy was in a state where she wanted to say, "How about tomorrow?" On the other hand, having Barbatos lured away to the other side was an extremely troublesome matter for Zagan.

It was exceedingly questionable whether Nephy was capable of bargaining with a genuine Archdemon, but there was significance in keeping her here. Thus, after hesitating for a few seconds, Nephy returned a gentle smile.

"Of course. I just so happen to want to speak to you as well."

Gremory was keeping an eye on Chastille and Barbatos. It was difficult to trust the granny, but Zagan believed in her. As such, Nephy chose to believe in Zagan's judgment.

"Black tea, please."

"Green tea."

Nephy and Eligor went to a nearby café. Nephy chose an outdoor seat at a place that had a terrace facing the street. It was a little embarrassing to have passersby stare at them, but if something happened, there would be less damage done outside than inside.

I wonder if she comes here often...

Seeing Eligor order a drink with familiarity brought that question to mind.

“Does she come here often?” Eligor whispered as if speaking to herself.

“Huh?”

Nephy unintentionally raised her voice because it felt like Eligor had read her mind.

“Hee hee, just the reaction I was hoping for. You really are adorable like that,” Eligor said, laughing bewitchingly. She then twirled her finger around the chain dangling from her collar and teasingly added, “My specialty is fortune telling.”

“Fortune telling...?”

Eligor nodded, her chains clanking quietly.

“Do you know that green tea is a drink from Liucaon? Not many on the continent are familiar with it, so few even know the name.”

Nephy had heard that before, so she returned a nod. They kept a stock at the castle for Lilith and the others from Liucaon. Nephy had found it bitter at first and hadn’t quite understood what was so good about it. However, when she’d tried it alongside fish, miso soup, and other such dishes from Liucaon, she’d found it to be unexpectedly pleasant.

As the two discussed such things, their drinks arrived. Nephy’s came in a stylish cup and pot. She was able to feel the shopkeeper’s consideration from how the tea’s fragrance gently wafted in the air. Eligor’s green tea came in a cylindrical cup particular to Liucaon, paired with what looked like a matching pot. Eligor went on to pour her tea into the cup with smooth motions as if the charms blocking her eyes weren’t there at all.

“Oh my, an upright tea stalk. That’s a good omen.”

Just as she said, a tea leaf’s detached stalk was standing on end in her cup like a little pillar.

“When this happens, it’s said good things will occur for the whole day. Isn’t that cute?” Eligor asked.

“Is that so...?”

Nephy wasn’t sure how to react to the unexpectedly normal chat. Eligor smiled as if enjoying that reaction.

“But you know, in truth, there’s a trick to making one stand.”

“Huh?”

“If you soak the tea in a small pot that’s no more than halfway

full, a stalk will always stand when you pour a cup. Customers who don't know this will definitely go home feeling uplifted, right?"

With that, Eligor flicked her cup.

"That's all fortune telling is. The important thing isn't seeing the future. No, it's far more modest than that. You say what the other person wants to hear to give them a little push on the back."

"Then you inviting me here was also due to fortune telling," Nephy said, nodding in understanding.

"Oh my, why do you think so?"

Nephy took a sip of her tea, then spoke calmly.

"This tea is delicious. If they're capable of such consideration, then I'm sure your green tea is also delicious. However, despite their skill, green tea isn't very popular. At this rate, this shop will eventually vanish."

There were no other customers inside, and the tables were so clean that they looked new. It gave a glimpse at how few people frequented the place. This didn't mean nobody was stopping to look, though.

"However, if you and I enjoy drinks here, I'm sure more people will start to show interest," Nephy concluded.

Nephy and Eligor drinking tea on the terrace attracted much attention. People stopped to see what was going on every now and then.

This talk of tea stalks wasn't for me, but for them.

When Nephy came to that answer, Eligor smiled as if to praise her.

"This is the only shop that serves proper green tea in this town, so I'd rather it not vanish."

Her plan seemed to be working. Guests entered the shop little by little.

"How did you know I would come here?" Nephy asked.

Eligor shook her head. Her black hair swayed like silk and an elegant aroma softly brushed against Nephy's nose.

"To tell you the truth," Eligor said, "I didn't plan on meeting you here. I simply meant to have tea on my own, but you just happened to pass by, so I invited you to tag along."

Nephy was incapable of reading how serious Eligor was being.

"I've heard that the Astrologian is capable of seeing the future, though..." Nephy stated.

"Do you truly believe the future can be seen?"

"Hmm. I don't know, but I believe it's possible to make predictions."

"Care to elaborate?" Eligor asked, slowly showing the palm of her left hand.

“Those with a mind for business can watch the flow of people and events to read what happens next. To read your opponent, hypothesizing what they will do and building countermeasures is common sense for sorcerers. By taking such methods to their logical conclusions, I’m sure it’s possible to read further ahead, much like predicting the future.”

Nephy paused there, then took a sip of tea before concluding her answer.

“Isn’t that what you just did?”

Before they knew it, the empty shop was lively. If it became renowned for its tea, its reputation would surely spread by word of mouth.

But there’s no way that’s all there is to an Archdemon.

Doing something anyone was capable of through training wouldn’t allow one to sit at the summit of all sorcerers. This Archdemon had yet to show even a fragment of her power. Nephy’s body stiffened from the tension in the air, while Eligor smiled at her bewitchingly once more.

“I heard you were but a novice sorcerer, but you’re rather clever, aren’t you? It seems Zagan is an excellent teacher.”

Nephy sensed some kind of implication—or rather, hostility—behind those words. She let that go and instead threw Eligor a different question.

“Do you see a future where you win over Lord Barbatos?”

“Fate can be changed,” Eligor said as if talking to herself. “The future isn’t predetermined. People believe that, so they’re able to keep moving forward. After all, hope is important, isn’t it?”

Eligor supported the bottom of her cup with a hand and drank her green tea before letting out a seductive sigh.

“But what if that isn’t the case? What if everything is predetermined from the very beginning, and no matter what you do, the future can’t be changed?”

“Hgh...”

She exerted a suffocating pressure. However, Nephy was the only one affected. None of the other customers in the shop seemed to notice the Archdemon preparing for war.

“A fortune teller, you see, isn’t meant to read their own future,” Eligor said, twirling her cup around. “Knowing one’s own future means you can no longer live. But say someone can truly ‘see’ the future, do you think they can choose what they see?”

Astrologian’s eyes were covered by ominous charms. She even had a chain attached to her neck, making her look like something abominable that had been locked away.

“That’s why, if there is an answer to that question—they *became*

capable of seeing it.”

What exactly had she seen? Her voice was empty, as if there was no hope or emotion behind it. Nephy bit her lip.

Did I make a face like this one year ago, I wonder...?

That was exactly why Eligor didn't seem like a stranger.

“Perhaps the future is predetermined,” Nephy said, putting a hand to her heart. “However, I believe what's important is how you get there.”

Knowing and not knowing the ending made a huge difference. In all likelihood, Nephy didn't really understand what that meant. Nevertheless, she held out her right hand.

“I doubt the desperate life I've lived until now was useless, after all.”

Could Eligor see Nephy sticking out her hand? Nephy could tell that Eligor gulped in shock. And so, faced with Nephy's determination, Eligor slowly raised her arm. She then hesitantly gripped it with the hand where her Sigil of the Archdemon was.

Nephy smiled, and just then...

“Guh...”

Eligor squeezed hard enough to make Nephy's bones creak.

“You know what? I've always hated you,” Eligor said, her lips forming a gentle smile. However, she wasn't really smiling at all. “If possible, I'd kill you right here and now, but unfortunately, I can still ‘see’ a future where you live. No matter what I do, some coincidence will keep you alive. Even though I'm this close to you, you'll still live.”

It took Nephy everything she had not to be overawed by Eligor's wrath.

Have I met this person before...?

She didn't believe so. If anyone out there had a grudge against her, it would be the elves of the hidden village. Most had died, but some might have survived. However, from what Nephy could see, Eligor's ears were shaped like those of any normal human. She didn't look like an elf whatsoever. And ever since then, Nephy hadn't had the opportunity to get involved with anyone enough to incur their enmity.

But that's no reason for me to just sit here quietly, is it now?

Nephy was Zagan's lover, and what's more, she was the Archdemon who'd inherited her mother's Sigil. She couldn't possibly remain silent and let Eligor say whatever she wanted. As such, Nephy donned a composed smile.

“How unfortunate,” she said. “I don't hate you at all.”

“You have more nerve than I thought,” Eligor replied in admiration, relaxing her grip. “Those are the words of one who loves and is loved. But you'd best be careful. Such people are the easiest to

drown in despair.”

There was more resignation than malice in her tone. Eligor let go, then sighed in regret.

“I’d like to chat a little more, but it seems time is up,” she said.

“Time...?”

Nephy quickly took a look around. She didn’t see anything particularly out of place. There were no sorcerers, Angelic Knights, or anyone else acting strangely. Just as she was about to ask for the true meaning behind those words...the sky split open, accompanied by a sound akin to shattering glass.

“What?!”

No, it wasn’t the sky that had split open, but the barrier covering the town.

Someone broke through Master Zagan’s barrier?!

Something then fell from the sky. It felt like it had Nephy’s heart in a viselike grip. She couldn’t breathe. Cold sweat poured down her entire body. It was clearly “something” far beyond human means. Everyone else in the shop...no, the entire town, was probably stuck in the same state as her. Those who were trembling violently were actually in the minority. The majority couldn’t even maintain consciousness and fainted. Even the Angelic Knights fell to their knees, while the sorcerers clutched their heads and trembled.

Nephy hadn’t even felt this much fear when she faced the Azazel-transformed “Nephteros.” However, oddly enough, she felt this wasn’t the first time she’d experienced this fear.

Where have I...?

Nephy sensed that she knew what this was.

“Heh heh heh, is it all right for you to be here?” Eligor asked, looking up at the sky. “That thing is beyond even Zagan’s capabilities.”

Zagan was stronger than anyone. Nephy knew that strength better than anyone, she believed in it more than anyone, but this thing was in an entirely different dimension. Nephy turned her back to Eligor’s scornful smile and ran off.

“I’ll leave my share.”

The shopkeeper had fainted, but Nephy still threw some change onto the table to cover her drink before dashing off to Zagan’s side. Eligor scoffed as if watching something truly boring, finished her green tea, placed money for her own drink on the table, and stood up.

“That’s why I hate you. That’s how you’ll destroy the world, after all,” muttering those last words, Eligor vanished.

Chapter IV: Nevertheless, It Seems Human Potential Can Be Found in Love

"This presence... It can't be, Samyaza...?"

In the steeple of Kianoides's church, Alshiera gulped. She watched Zagan's barrier shatter as a nostalgic presence seeped through it.

Why after all this time...?

Alshiera knew what Samyaza was. She knew, which was why she didn't understand the current predicament at all.

"Samyaza isn't supposed to get involved with this world anymore..."

As she muttered that, another presence suddenly appeared behind her.

"Aha, can you tell me a little more about what you know?"

A girl with star-accented eyes bent over through a hole in space. A robe that was the very color of nothingness was wrapped around her.

"Forbidden Weave Tartaros. So you have it."

"Yes, it's part of my precious collection."

Woven of the bodies of subspace predators, this robe could also be used to cross through space. The act still did, of course, require significant skill to accomplish. The silver-haired girl landed behind Alshiera noiselessly.

Did she come here because Zagan's barrier is gone?

She was entirely capable of intruding even if the barrier was up, but she wouldn't be able to avoid Zagan's detection. As such, she'd been waiting for this moment. Alshiera looked over her shoulder and returned the girl's gaze.

"Tee hee hee, welcome back, Lily. But isn't there someone else you should be showing your face to first?"

"Tsk, ts. It's Asmodeus, Alshiera," Asmodeus replied as she wagged her finger, then brought her face closer to Alshiera's shoulder. "Hey, hey, come on. Can't you tell me? I'm so curious. What is that?"

"Oh my," Alshiera mumbled, staring in wonder as if she found this wholly unexpected. "Isn't the Collector's way to take what she wants by force? Do you change your approach depending on your opponent?"

"Aha, did you hear that from Behemoth? Oh please, I'm no savage. People always attack me before I finish talking, so I end up having to crush them, that's all."

Asmodeus laughed, then glared down at the town with an unusually serious expression on her face.

“Well, I’d love to do that, but I’m disinclined to turn this place into an empty lot. If you wanna go elsewhere, then I’ll gladly accept, though. Oh, I’ll be the one meeting your needs, so submit an application. I’ll give you some special service!”

Alshiera unintentionally strained a smile as the girl twisted her body coquettishly.

“You’re the first person to say that to me in a thousand years.”

Part of it was because Alshiera had weakened significantly, but this girl also had enough strength to at least try to resort to that method.

And to think Asmodeus showed Foll consideration.

Asmodeus hadn’t used a single piece of her collection—including Tartaros—in her fight against Foll. Had she meant to test the little girl using purely the power of an Archdemon? Or maybe she’d been testing her own fate. Perhaps she’d been under the impression that Foll would be able to stop her. Maybe that was the little girl’s truly terrifying aspect. Even Alshiera couldn’t leave or brush her off when overawed by her earnest gaze and had been forced to open up to Zagan about being his mother.

She’s the true swindler here.

Perhaps Zagan and Nephy were no exceptions either. Alshiera shrugged, then pulled a parasol from her creepy stuffed doll.

“I suppose I’ll talk. In deference to your awkward message to Foll, I’ll give you a single answer.”

Alshiera had also heard that Lily’s name was mentioned in that gossip rag. Most would see it as meaningless rumors, but those who knew would immediately be able to tell that it was a hidden message to Foll.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Asmodeus muttered, averting her gaze.

“To put it into words—that which controlled evil.”

“Hmm... Does the use of past tense mean it’s different now?”

“Who knows? As far as I know, Samyaza was the first.”

“So why is it coming out now?”

“I don’t know either.”

Much like me, Samyaza is detached from the laws of this world.

They had both decided to remain out of this world’s affairs. The main difference was that Alshiera had remained inside the world, while Samyaza had remained outside it. If Samyaza was back, that meant...

“Something has happened on the outside...?”

But Alshiera’s barrier was still functioning normally. The only

thing that came to mind was that incident with Furcas from the other day. At the time, Alshiera had been driven to the very limit of vanishing. She'd meant to at least maintain the barrier's function to the end, but she couldn't deny the possibility that Samyaza had slipped through at the time. Or rather, it would've been impossible at any other time.

"Alshiera, what do you think of the demons surging out these days? You're not gonna tell me you haven't noticed, right?"

"I said I'd give you a single answer."

Even after that cold reply, Asmodeus twirled on the spot like she didn't care.

"Then let's just say I'm talking to myself. Tons of demons are showing up, but unlike five years ago, Alshiera isn't doing a thing. That means things are different this time."

Asmodeus started lining up the facts she knew one by one.

"Demons were supposed to have been sealed away a thousand years ago, but what's this? One thousand years ago is when Alshiera and them were in a big tussle, isn't it? So, what sealed the demons was probably Alshiera's barrier. I mean, Alshiera is the barrier's supervisor and all."

She then cocked her head with theatrical mannerisms.

"By the way, humans can't leave the continent. That's because they're blocked in some way by a barrier, right?"

This world was sealed within a barrier and was made up of nothing but the continent and the small island nation of Liucaon, which was less than a tenth of the planet's original surface.

"Oh, then is Alshiera's barrier maybe the same barrier that envelops the continent?"

Asmodeus clapped her hands as if she'd made an astonishing discovery.

"Huh? But that's weird. In that case, rather than the demons being sealed, it's more like—Mph."

Alshiera sealed the Archdemon's talkative lips with a finger. Asmodeus's eyes shot open at being unable to react to her speed. Alshiera's lips then moved without making a sound.

"You mustn't say more than that."



Had her words gotten across? Whatever the case, Asmodeus narrowed her eyes.

“It’s just as you’ve imagined,” Alshiera said. “The demons who are showing up now aren’t coming from the outside.”

This left Asmodeus at her wits’ end. Even without explicitly saying it, Alshiera knew that this girl would understand.

The demons Asmodeus had fought had come from inside the barrier. Even if Alshiera was able to crush them, she wouldn’t be able to fundamentally solve the problem. Alshiera didn’t have the spare energy to deal with naturally manifesting demons, after all.

Asmodeus carefully opened her mouth, giving this proper consideration.

“Is there a way of dealing with them? I’m the one who got rid of every last demon until now, so I’m pretty sure you owe me an answer.”

Unfortunately, Alshiera could do nothing but shake her head. She did choose to give one more detail, though.

“The same thing happened one thousand years ago. The ones who fought them at the time were the seraphs.”

Their excessive power had been fostered for that very purpose to begin with, not to purge some uprising.

“The seraphs are no more, so you had to put up that barrier, you mean?” Asmodeus asked.

“That’s how it turned out in the end. However, there was someone other than me who tried to stop the demons another way.”

“And who was that?”

Answering this question was too heavy a task for Alshiera. Nevertheless, she resolved to do so.

“He erased every trace of his name and existence from this world.”

Asmodeus’s expression turned grim.

I don’t know if he did anything.

All those who were present at the time had lost their lives. After that, the only one who’d been resurrected was Alshiera. She had no way of knowing what he’d attempted. All she knew was that “his existence had been erased down to the very last memory of him.” And, until they next appeared, demons had stopped manifesting.

“But that means a method exists, right?” Asmodeus said, folding her arms.

“Probably.”

“A method even the thousand-year-old Alshiera doesn’t know...” Asmodeus mumbled with an ostentatious sigh. She then leaned against the handrail and looked down at the town. “My head hurts. I’m not

really one to talk after keeping you here, but you sure you don't need to help? I'm pretty certain this is a little much for Zagan."

Zagan and Samyaza were squaring off. As his second name—Sorcerer Slayer—implied, he was a sorcerer who specialized in fighting sorcerers—Archdemons in particular. If Zagan and Asmodeus fought, Zagan would probably win. With all her sorcery devoured and the Sigil of the Archdemon sealed, Asmodeus wouldn't be able to muster all her strength.

However, Zagan's namesake didn't work against demons. For the first time, Zagan would have to fight outside his arena. Regardless, Alshiera shook her head.

"Those children don't need my help anymore."

She believed in them, so she didn't interfere.

If they stumble over something so trivial, they won't survive what's to come...

"Well, it's got nothing to do with me," Asmodeus said, shrugging. She then hopped over the railing.

"Oh my, leaving already?"

"I've got a little something to take care of right now. It looks like my cute disciple is picking a fight."

"Do be careful. You're being targeted, you know?"

If this girl died, Foll would be sad.

"I'm famous for not knowing when to give up," Asmodeus replied, smiling provocatively all the while.

This girl also stood on the precipice of death while understanding everything. The two who were considered the strongest in the world crossed paths for but a moment, then parted ways once more.



"Good grief... A demon in a place like this?"

Right as Kianoides's barrier broke, Zagan had immediately left Archdemon Palace. A demon had appeared in the middle of the shopping district. He'd been researching Raphael and Richard's Sacred Swords and had had no choice but to leave them in his throne room.

He took a look around. Hundreds of civilians had collapsed all over. It looked like heaps of corpses, but he could still hear them breathing. They'd likely lost consciousness and were in no danger of dying. They simply hadn't possessed the power to look at the thing directly. Zagan couldn't imagine why a demon wouldn't kill anyone, though. That said, Zagan had to put effort into stopping himself from breaking into a cold sweat.

What the hell is that thing? It's completely different from the average demon.

The demon that had fallen out of the sky was akin to a pitch-black

shadow. Crests made of circles and lines covered the surface of its body. And yet, it had all the limbs of a proper human and even wore an old robe like a human.

He thought demons took on shapes that were beyond human understanding, so when it was so close to looking like a human, it was actually ominous. Zagan had fought thousands of demons when saving Lilith and Furcas, but no specimen of the like had existed among them.

This was a completely unknown enemy. However, for some reason, Zagan felt like this wasn't his first time seeing it.

I'll investigate later. For now, I need to drive this thing back.

For some reason, demons obeyed the Sigil of the Archdemon. Sealed within the Sigil was apparently someone with a deep connection to demons called the Demon King or the first Archdemon or whatever else. And just as Zagan was about to speak through the Sigil...

"Don't tell me to 'leave' this time, my king."

Zagan felt the blood drain from his face.

"I see. You're..."

Before fighting the swarm of demons, before even fighting the demon Orias had summoned, right after Zagan became an Archdemon, he'd met a summoned demon.

There's only ever been one demon who understood speech.

It was the demon Barbatos had tried summoning when he'd abducted Nephy. Because of Zagan's mana, it'd been summoned in an incomplete form, but this was apparently the same demon in its complete form. Even a mere shadow of this demon had instilled so much fear in Zagan that he hadn't even considered the idea of standing against it. At the time, he'd known with certainty that humanity could do nothing to harm it.

I didn't mean to become so arrogant...

But he had. He was full of himself. Before he knew it, after defeating many demons, he'd forgotten. He'd come to believe he was strong. He'd been under the delusion that demons could be defeated. He'd convinced himself that the fear he felt back then was due to his weakness. And after a full year, this demon he met for the second time was far greater than before, instilling enough fear in Zagan that he wanted to crumble to his knees.

Don't be so naive, Zagan. You call yourself a king?

He forced his legs to stop trembling, then folded his arms and loomed over the demon.

"You're not a shadow like last time, I see. It doesn't look like you're here to pledge your service, so what do you want?"

"My name is Samyaza," the demon said, taking its time. "I've

come to verify the potential I entrusted to *Solomon* through our ancient pledge.”

“What...?”

One word resonated with an ear-grating noise. However, strangely enough, Zagan heard a name in there.

Solomon...? Is that what it said?

He felt like this was an extremely important name, enough so that it was a miracle that he'd heard it and had committed it to memory.

At any rate, I was right to leave Barbatos to Gremory.

This was the one space manipulation sorcery that man had ever failed at. It wasn't hard to imagine him stubbornly charging in if he saw this. Zagan couldn't even begin to guess the meaning behind Samyaza's words, but there was one thing that was clear now.

Looks like it's here to fight me.

There was no hostility or hatred, but the demon faced Zagan with a clear desire to do battle.

One year ago, I might've run away.

Back then, he couldn't withstand his fear. What's more, he hadn't had a reason to fight at the risk of his own life. Setting aside whether he would've been able to run away, there'd been no need to be so foolish as to challenge a stronger opponent. But now, things were different.

Nobody will follow a king who can't protect his subjects.

And so, he stood to face his enemy.

“I have a lot to ask, but first, we'll be moving elsewhere,” Zagan said.

Now that his barrier was gone, he couldn't restore any damage done to the town. What's more, the populace would suffer tremendous casualties if a battle took place amidst their homes.

“Heaven's Scale Eastern Sky. Heaven's Ring Shadow Sever.”

Without waiting for Samyaza's reply, Zagan unleashed two of his trump cards. The enormous arm made of Heaven's Scale grabbed the demon, then he used Heaven's Ring to fly away from the shopping district at breakneck speed.

“Very well. I do not wish to involve the denizens of this world either,” Samyaza replied without resisting whatsoever.



Around the same time, Barbatos and Vepar also sensed the presence. Even Vepar, who'd looked rather nonchalant the whole time prior to sensing it, had cold sweat pouring down his face.

“Wh-What exactly is going on?”

In contrast, Barbatos was far more shaken.

This mana... This pressure... It can't be...!

One year ago, when Barbatos opposed Zagan to take the seat of an Archdemon, Barbatos had tried to summon a demon to demonstrate his power. At the time, he'd failed due to Zagan's interference, but the summoning itself had been accomplished in an incomplete form. As a result, Barbatos had been frozen in fear, unable to so much as lift a finger. Had Zagan not driven it away using his Sigil, it was unlikely Barbatos would've even been able to put up any resistance.

And now that thing's back?!

As the one who'd summoned it, Barbatos was just about ready to run after it.

"You're better off refraining. That thing is beyond human strength," Archdemon Eligor said.

"You again...?"

"I've come to hear your answer, Barbatos."

"Sorry, can you leave that for later? I don't got time for that crap now."

There was no way Chastille was going to sit still with such a thing in Kianoides. She'd also witnessed this demon a year ago. She understood how terrifying it was, but it was easy to see that this would only spur her sense of responsibility all the more. And just as Barbatos focused on his shadow, he was left in shock.

Huh? The crybaby ain't there...?

For some reason, the one on the other side of the shadow was Rachel. She apparently sensed the demon too and was trembling with her head under the desk. Her butt was sticking out completely, so it was pretty meaningless, though. A bead of sweat ran down Barbatos's cheek.

No way. I lost track through the shadow? Me?

The only way that could happen was if the shadow was moved to someone else without doing anything to affect the shadow itself. But even if that was theoretically possible, Barbatos had concluded that no human could actually pull it off. It wasn't quite clear how Eligor interpreted Barbatos's agitation as she looked up at the sky in an uninterested manner.

"Be at ease," she said. "In another forty-three seconds, that demon will leave this place. With Zagan, that is."

And as Barbatos remained in confusion for a quick forty-three seconds, the air trembled with a boom and a golden light stretched straight up above the town before going west. That light was Zagan's Heaven's Scale. Barbatos let out a sigh of relief. If the thing was outside of town for now, Chastille wouldn't be able to do anything reckless.

Hang on... Why do I gotta worry my ass off about her?

Still not knowing when to give up on that train of thought, he

tossed insults about in his mind as Eligor continued.

“So that’s how it is. As things stand, nobody will get in the way.”

Such was the terrifying Astrologian.

She can really see the future? Seriously?

The reason she hadn’t forced the issue when they first met was because there was a risk Zagan would’ve gotten in the way. No matter how often he insulted Barbatos, although it was irritating to admit, Zagan understood Barbatos’s worth better than anyone.

She’d given it several days because she’d known that Zagan wouldn’t have the time to pay her any attention at this very moment. Everything had gone exactly as this Archdemon had planned.

Don’t that mean no matter what I say, the result ain’t gonna change?

If he was to refuse, Barbatos’s best play was to take Chastille far away to somewhere Eligor couldn’t reach. However, the offer was far more tempting than he’d imagined, which swayed his emotions. He was going to have to eventually settle things with Zagan, so breaking ties with him now wasn’t a problem. However, if they were planning to force him to obey, it was Barbatos’s principle to refuse outright. And just as he readied himself to make a decision...

“Heh heh heh... Hee hee hee...” Vepar started laughing sweetly as if he couldn’t stand it anymore.

“Did something funny happen, Earthshaker Vepar?” Eligor asked.

“Oh, excuse me. It’s an honor for an Archdemon to remember my name,” Vepar replied, shamelessly putting a hand to his chest and bowing. With the demon gone, he’d regained his composure. He then spoke with an air of sympathy. “It seems the good lady Astrologian Eligor’s sight isn’t almighty.”

“Oh my. And why do you say that?”

“That blindfold is quite the powerful seal,” he said, pointing at his own eyes. “Using it, you seal your own power so that you don’t see unnecessary things. As such, you haven’t seen how Barbatos will answer, nor have you verified anything beyond this point. Is that about right?”

If she saw the future and knew Barbatos would refuse, she wouldn’t have gone through the trouble of trying to recruit him. Barbatos had figured she’d seen a future where he agreed, but...

“Allow me to make a prediction,” Vepar said, holding up an elegant finger. “Barbatos will refuse your invitation and you will go through a truly tiresome experience.”

Vepar boldly predicted the future while standing before Astrologian Eligor. Naturally, Eligor laughed at this.

“Hee hee hee. My, your chirping is so pleasant to the ears, little birdie. I can see why Asmodeus dotes on you. I rather like that, you know?” she replied, then turned to Barbatos. “But how unfortunate.

Barbatos, you know the true identity of that demon, don't you?"

"Well...yeah."

At the same time, having seen that, Barbatos's answer was already decided.

That asshole Zagan faced the thing by himself. Not just once, but twice.

During the time Barbatos had faltered and been unable to move, Zagan had taken a step forward.

I can't be standing still in a place like this no more.

He wasn't going to be picky about how he acquired strength.

"Sorry, Vepar. Part of me wants to go along with your prediction, but I'm gonna go with her."

Eligor must've seen this future too. She smiled bewitchingly and held out a hand.

"Then shall we? Our king awaits."

And just as he was about to take her hand...

"Barbatos. If you don't understand, then allow me to educate you," Vepar said. "If you go with her, you'll have no choice but to cross blades with the Maiden of the Sacred Sword."

"Huh? What?" Barbatos muttered, seeming flabbergasted, before suddenly pulling his hand back without thinking.

"Give it some thought," Vepar said, shaking his head at the expected reaction. "I don't know if he's the real thing, but Eligor's working with Marchosias, right? However, that same Marchosias was the church's pope. He's the man who created the present-day antagonism between sorcerers and Angelic Knights."

"I'm surprised you even know that shit..."

That fact was only known to a small circle of sorcerers within Zagan's camp. It was even being kept from Chastille, who was an Archangel.

"I've put in significant effort to gather information," Vepar said, smiling impishly before making a serious expression. "Now then, what do you think will happen when the Maiden of the Sacred Sword, the figurehead of the Unification Faction that is allied with Archdemon Zagan, learns of the truth? Zagan is very likely already hostile to Marchosias. In the not-too-distant future, they will inevitably clash."

Vepar then covered his mouth with his sleeve as if he'd discovered something that should've remained secret.

"Oops, well isn't that problematic? Barbatos, what will happen if you're at Marchosias's side at that point? I don't know what kind of relationship you two have, but I'm sure you can imagine how that serious girl will prioritize her duty."

An unpleasant sweat poured down Barbatos's brow.

"Let me ask you one more time, Barbatos," Vepar whispered

sympathetically. “Are you really okay with that?”

“Like hell I am!” Barbatos shouted, suddenly flaring up.



Why?! Why's it gotta end up like that?!

The problem wasn't having a sword turned against him. It was that *Chastille* had to turn a sword against him.

She might be able to endure while in work mode, but she'll be useless after that, yeah?

Barbatos was confident he would be able to survive one way or another, but living or dying had nothing to do with this. It was crystal clear that her turning her sword on him would torment her for eternity. What's more, if Barbatos did die in the process due to some mistake, it would haunt her for the rest of her life.

A human's life was at most sixty or seventy years, but she would still carry that regret with her until the day she died. That was one thing he couldn't allow. Barbatos instantly pictured Zagan or the like reeling back if they heard this, telling him, "It's disgusting for you to understand that and still not be dating."

"Sorry, Eligor," Barbatos said, taking a step away from her. "I'm gonna hafta turn down your offer."

Vepar won the bout of predictions. Eligor didn't reply. She simply remained standing there in displeased silence. Unable to bear it any longer, Vepar burst into laughter.

"Heh heh... Ha ha ha... Ha ha ha ha ha ha! Well, well. I didn't want to get involved, but watching this from the side is so very pleasant. That was just great."

I've never seen this guy laugh like that...

Barbatos had known Vepar for a relatively long time, but it was his first time seeing him open his mouth wide and laugh. He was almost captivated by the sight, but suddenly returned to his senses.

"Why the hell are you getting such a kick outta this?!" Barbatos yelled, glaring at Vepar.

"Oh, come now," Vepar said, hiding his smile with his sleeve. "I wanted to try *playing* fortune teller too."

Those words finally got Eligor to open her mouth. What came out first was a deep, deep sigh.

"It's been four hundred years since I've become an Archdemon, but this is the first time I've been made such a fool of. You may take pride in that, little boys."

Oh crap, she's pissed.

That was to be expected, of course. She'd gone so far to set the stage so meticulously and had prepared the most delectable reward only for all of it to go to waste in the worst possible manner. It would be unreasonable to ask even the most patient person to remain calm.

"Well, that's it for me, I'm out."

However, Barbatos wasn't an admirable enough man to stake his

life on fighting an opponent he didn't need to challenge. Thus, he didn't hesitate to jump into his shadow as a voice trembling in anger chased him from behind.

"Do you think—?"

"—I'll let you run?"

Even though he was already inside the shadow—escaping into subspace—it felt like an invisible hand crushed him in its grip. He then saw a jangling silver chain stretching endlessly into space.

"Waaah?!"

And so, despite having escaped into his absolute domain, Barbatos was dragged right back out to the surface, unable to do anything to resist. Bound hand and foot by the chain, he tumbled across the ground like a worm.

The hell is this chain? It went all the way into subspace?!

The silver chain was connected to Eligor's collar. It wasn't sorcery, but instead some kind of magic item. It reminded him of the Hex Katana one of Shere Khan's Nephilim had used against him. Much like it, the chain had the power to cross through space. Regardless, Barbatos glared at Vepar instead.

"Vepar, you ass! The hell're you getting in my way for?!"

What'd first restrained Barbatos after he'd gone into subspace was Vepar's power.

"How can I let you run away after you forced this trouble into my lap?" Vepar replied, sighing.

Judging by his composed expression, Vepar was angry, but not yet hostile. That meant he wasn't Barbatos's enemy yet.

It'll be a real pain if this guy turns against me...

Vepar's sorcery was capable of traversing an infinite amount of space. Barbatos had poor affinity against him. If Vepar was on the other team, Barbatos wouldn't get out of here alive.

"Vepar, you're here to help me out, remember? Ain't turning against me a breach of contract?"

"I took on the task of teaching you common sense. That doesn't include lending you a hand."

And yet, a silver chain also coiled around Vepar's body as he spoke.

"Little birdie? It'd do you well not to consider yourself a third party here."

"Goodness... I do believe I already warned you. You're in for a tiresome experience," Vepar said, sighing as he looked down at the chain binding him. "I remember seeing this chain before. It was in Asmodeus's catalog. If I remember right—"

"God Binder Libitina—it seals any and every power of those it binds. Isn't it wonderful?"

This item had apparently once been in Collector Asmodeus's possession. Did that mean Eligor had obtained it through some manner of trade? It had dreadful power, but Vepar shook at it as if it was nothing serious.

"That's not quite accurate," he said. "To be precise, it isolates any kind of power. However, there is one thing this chain cannot defend against."

"Such a thing doesn't exist," Eligor replied.

At the very least, Barbatos's sorcery was sealed and he was unable to do anything but lay on the ground. Eligor wasn't lying, but Vepar spoke with conviction.

"Oh? It exists all right. Just like this," he stated, pointing at the chains as they clinked to the ground. "All objects fall to the earth because they are under the influence of a force called gravity. So long as Libitina has physical substance, it cannot escape that law."

The chain on the ground started creaking and sinking into the ground. This was the same power that had restrained Barbatos inside the shadow. As the personal disciple of Asmodeus, the ruler of gravity, it was only natural for him to have inherited that power.

So Vepar's sorcery can get rid of these stupid chains, huh?

"Hey, Vepar! Lend me a damn hand!" Barbatos shouted. "She's not planning on letting you outta here alive either, yeah?!"

"Hmm, what a spot to find myself in. I have no intention of assisting either of you."

He was just one little push away.

If I can get Vepar on my side, I'll be able to run away somehow.

If Eligor chased them, he would have to fight, but he doubted she'd go that far. She would probably pay them back with some pain, but Vepar was likely to accept that as a cheap price to pay. Barbatos needed a definitive hand to get Vepar to fight. If he couldn't find it, Barbatos would be carried away like baggage, his sorcery sealed by this chain.

Think. There has to be something. Something to get Vepar's attention.

After giving it some thought, he found his answer.

"Hey, Vepar."

"What is it?"

Barbatos flashed a mean-spirited smile, then whispered, "Asmodeus is working with her, you know? You capture her and I'm sure you can get some intel."

Enmity toward his teacher was what drove this sorcerer's every action. And just as expected, Vepar let out a helpless sigh.

"Goodness... You owe me one."

With that, the silver chain binding Barbatos jangled and came undone.

“I’ll make it worth your time. I’m a man of my word.”

Spouting a line that would probably make Zagan come running to slug him in the face, Barbatos and his fellow former Archdemon candidate readied themselves.



In the large prairie west of Kianoides, where ten thousand Nephilim led by Shere Khan had clashed with Angelic Knights one month ago, where the zombie dragon Orobas had been laid to rest, Zagan and Samyaza stood face-to-face.

Even being gripped by Eastern Sky did nothing, huh?

Heaven’s Scale was sorcery that strengthened itself by absorbing mana from its surroundings. For a demon with no physical substance, constant contact should have been a deadly enough poison to erase them from existence. However, it’d served no purpose at all. Zagan shifted his gaze to the enormous arm floating to his right.

No, it did absorb mana.

It had absorbed an abnormal amount too. Western and Eastern Sky were Zagan’s most frequently used form of Heaven’s Scale, but he’d never seen it this strong before.

“This will do,” Samyaza said, turning its head around to take in their surroundings. Unexpectedly, what came out of its robe was a human arm, fully featured with a hand and five fingers, wielding a black blade. “Then let us begin.”

No time for small talk, huh?

Zagan clenched his fist. He then kicked off the ground, charging straight forward and thrusting out Eastern Sky as a fist. The earth shook with a thunderous boom. The one left wide-eyed—though it was questionable whether the demon even had eyes—was Zagan.

“A good punch.”

Samyaza had caught Eastern Sky with one hand, making cracks run down the massive fist’s length.

“Heaven’s Scale lost in a battle of pure strength?!” Zagan shouted in shock as Eastern Sky shattered. Having absorbed Samyaza’s mana, it was supposed to be stronger than ever before, yet it had been crushed with ease.

“Now it’s my turn,” Samyaza said, wielding the black blade in its opposite hand.

After courteously informing Zagan what was to come, the black blade arced through the air. Zagan immediately stepped backward, a tuft of his bangs dancing above him as blood spurted from a gash running from his cheek to his brow.

But I dodged it!

Rather than wind pressure, it was more like mana pressure had

cut him. Even when he'd dodged by a hair's breadth, mana tore his skin apart. Still, Zagan wasn't just clumsily shedding blood here. His left hand had completed his next move.

"Heaven's Phosphor Fivefold Grand Flower!"

This was the strongest attack Zagan could weave on his own. He wasn't conspicuously firing it into the air either. The blades remained fixed to his fingers and he directly slammed them into Samyaza's exposed torso. The five black flames pierced the demon's body as if passing through water.

"Hrrrgh?!" Samyaza groaned in pain for the first time. The five instances of Heaven's Phosphor burst inside its body, and Samyaza was blown back, gouging a trough in the ground. Devouring its tremendous mana, the five nails grew taller than Zagan himself in the blink of an eye. Now at a size that they were liable to cut the demon into shreds, they burned away at its life force from the inside out.

There's no way it should survive that...

Regardless, Zagan's mind told him to remain cautious. This demon couldn't possibly be that weak, after all. And just as expected, as the cloud of dust settled...

"I see. What dreadful power. Even when compared to that girl, it is in no way inferior."

Despite losing a majority of its body, the demon stood with composure, leaving Zagan wide-eyed in shock.

That's weird... The wounds caused by Heaven's Phosphor...are sealing?

His power wasn't so weak that one could escape it simply by amputating the affected limb. Even Bifrons had been unable to escape their ultimate fate. Zagan stared at the demon with his silver eyes, then gulped.

"How many demons is your damned body made of?"

Within the gaps of its broken body, another demon crawled out and filled in what was missing. There'd been less of Samyaza left than what'd been destroyed, but all of that was recovering before Zagan's very eyes. This explained his fear. It explained why Heaven's Phosphor wasn't enough. It explained why Eastern Sky had shattered so easily.

Samyaza wasn't a single demon. It was a swarm. It was an amalgamation of tens of hundreds of demons.

"I don't have a precise count myself," Samyaza said, cocking its head. "But somewhere around ten thousand, I suppose."

"Hah..."

Zagan let a dry smile slip. In other words, if he wanted to defeat this demon, he'd have to kill it ten thousand times. Once its body was restored, Samyaza formed its black blade once more.

"Now it's my turn."

Feeling a chill run down his spine, Zagan readied himself for a long battle.



“Eat this! Shadow Needle!”

Barbatos slapped his hand to the ground and countless shadowy thorns thrust out at Eligor’s feet. It should have been impossible to evade this bed of needles, but Eligor casually bent to the side and slipped past all of them. Even when Aristella had been taken over by Azazel, this sorcery had had some effect, but here, it hadn’t even grazed Eligor’s clothes. Regardless, a hole in space awaited Eligor as she got away from the nails.

It was a void where no sound or smell existed. With her eyesight sealed, Eligor had no way of perceiving it. And yet, she bent over and dodged it too. As she passed by, she even had the leisure to brush a finger along its contour.

“Tch, figured she’d read everything I do.”

Barbatos had already launched multiple attacks at her, but Eligor hadn’t taken a single hit.

“Vepar! Help out already!”

“I will if you don’t mind the town being reduced to an empty lot,” Vepar replied.

“I don’t care! Just fucking do it!”

Even as Barbatos wailed, Vepar shook his head.

“Don’t be stupid. That monster destroyed Archdemon Zagan’s barrier. The town has likely lost its ability to restore itself. Just think of what will happen if his domain is broken in the meantime. I’d rather not make an enemy of a group that’s taking on four or five Archdemons.”

As for how this sorcerer was helping, then...

“Come now, there’s no time to lose focus. Concentrate on Eligor,” Vepar said.

A silver chain had crept up on Barbatos while he was talking to Vepar. Vepar stopped its movements, so Barbatos managed to get away from it.

This chain is a real pain. I can’t even sink into the shadows right now.

The biggest problem was that Barbatos wasn’t very well equipped. He’d put away his robe and could only use what sorcery had been charged into his earrings. Honestly, if Vepar hadn’t been protecting him, he wouldn’t have been able to put up much of a fight at all. In that sense, Vepar was contributing more than enough. Already sick of this battle where she’d read thousands of moves ahead, Eligor let out a sigh.

“Could you two just be obedient while I’m still being kind? I’m

not fond of violence.”

That was actually true. Eligor had only been using the chain and hadn't used any kind of sorcery. She hadn't shown even a fragment of her power as an Archdemon.

Think. If she's actually invincible, wouldn't she be considered the strongest Archdemon?

Despite that, the title belonged to Andrealphus. Eligor's name was only known among the Archdemons for her ability to see the future. She wasn't supposed to be a combat specialist.

If Vepar is right, she isn't looking at the future.

Was there some kind of risk or restriction to using her ability? If so, how was she reading all his attacks? Either way, it at least meant it was possible to hit her somehow. In short, there was a way of overcoming her abilities.

Perhaps no longer seeing Barbatos as an enemy worthy of attention, Eligor turned to Vepar.

“Little birdie, you act like this has nothing to do with you. I don't plan on letting you go either, you know?”

Libitina didn't work on Vepar, so instead of using the chain, Eligor swung her arm.

“Hgh, guh...”

Immediately following that, a gale assaulted Vepar. He managed to stand his ground without falling over, but blood splattered from all over his body.

That ain't no wind. Some kinda weapon is hidden in there.

Blades born of a strong wind weren't enough to wound a sorcerer, let alone a former Archdemon candidate. Vepar wiped the blood from his cheek, then let out a small sigh.

“My goodness... We both have to go through such tiresome experiences because of Barbatos,” he said. “If anything, I actually sympathize with you. If you're going to act like this, though, then I have no choice but to join the fray.”

“Oh my, were you being considerate? How kind of you. If Barbatos agrees to come along quietly, I don't mind letting you be my pet.”

“Eligor,” Vepar said, his smile vanishing. “If you speak so arrogantly, you must have the strength to back it up.”

This had apparently pissed him off. In contrast, Eligor smiled in amusement.

“Oh dear. Are you angry? Forgive me, but it's your fault for playing such a cute prank.”

Well, Vepar had also crushed Eligor's pride, so they were even on that front. Vepar held up his palm...and a sword manifested silently.

“Hmm, so you use a sword,” Eligor said, observing the blade

curiously. "You don't look like the type."

"I'm sure I don't. I have no experience wielding a blade."

Withstanding the urge to quip about bringing one out in such a case, Barbatos carefully observed Vepar's movements.

He's drawing it against an Archdemon. There's no way that's a normal sword.

Vepar's weapon was floating in the air without touching his hand. Barbatos couldn't tell if that was also because of gravity manipulation sorcery.

"This is a prototype I made while I was researching a certain something," Vepar whispered, touching the blade of the sword. "It doesn't have a name yet, but it has an interesting function."

Vepar drew a large arc through the air with his finger, and the sword followed along. However, even after moving, the sword remained in its original position.

"What the hell?" Barbatos said in astonishment.

New swords appeared like afterimages in the path Vepar traced. After forming a full circle with his arm, nearly a hundred swords were created.

"Eligor, your precognitive abilities are worthy of praise, but what if you're faced with an attack where dodging is meaningless?"

With that, Vepar snapped his fingers and the hundred swords attacked Eligor from every direction. Seeing that Vepar had created these, they couldn't be simple iron blades.

"I get it! There's no dodging that!" Barbatos shouted.

"It's an amusing art piece," Eligor replied, a compassionate smile on her lips. "But do you truly believe such a toy will accomplish anything?"

Eligor casually waved her silver chain. The supposedly cold and heavy chain floated in the air like a feather, colliding with all hundred swords. The clash ended with the swords shattering. Earlier, Eligor hadn't even been grazed by the countless Shadow Needles that had assaulted her from beneath. Barbatos didn't know what kind of power those swords had, but they couldn't possibly work against her. However, Vepar was the one who still smiled in the end.

"Oh, how pitiful... You would've been so much happier had you not shattered them," he said.

"Huh?!"

The shattered fragments turned in the air and rained down on Eligor once more.

"This is what I meant when I said dodging was meaningless."

Eligor repelled the countless fragments with her chain, but they turned and went right back toward her. It didn't matter if she could see the future or predict their paths. Blades finally got past Eligor's

chain and cut her cheek, tore open her arm, and stabbed her back. The raining shards had bright red blood spurting from Eligor's entire body.

“That's payback for before. What, did you not see this future?” Vepar asked, smiling boldly.



“I meant to be gentle, but all that did was make you conceited,” Eligor said, wiping her cheek and sighing. “Dealing with little children can be so difficult.”

With that, Eligor spread out her arms, standing with the moon to her back. The sun had apparently set during the battle. Bathing in the moonlight, Eligor’s figure changed. Claws stretched from her hands and a thick tail grew from her waist. Tapered ears sprouted from her head and bulky fangs peeked from her jaw.

“A therianthrope... No, a werewolf?”

There was a rare species that transformed into a half-beast form under the moonlight. The difference between a lycan and a werewolf was the fact that a werewolf was usually in human form. Another difference was that the amount of mana they possessed was on a fundamentally different level. Naturally, the beast form possessed far more power than the human one.

“Hey, Vepar. Why’d you go and piss her off?”

“I don’t want to hear that from you. Aren’t you the one who angered her first?”

The voluptuous beauty was nowhere in sight. Instead, she’d been replaced by a raging beast who only knew slaughter.



“Heaven’s Phosphor Purple Lightning.”

Zagan pierced the demon’s body like a lightning bolt. He repeatedly threw punches, leaving a faint purple light behind as a trail, but only the first few strikes landed properly.

“High speed movement this time? Impressive.”

Blood spurted from Zagan’s fist. Samyaza had used its sword to cut Zagan’s fist white it was in motion.

Even Purple Lightning is being cut down...? No, wait, has the demon surpassed the speed of Shadow Sever?

Purple Lightning was sorcery that was always used in combination with Shadow Sever. Zagan was constantly in motion throwing punches from blind spots, but the demon reacted to his movements. Samyaza wielded its sword in its right hand, so Zagan swerved around to the opposite side to attack. However, that too was stopped by the flat of its blade. This time he hadn’t gotten cut, but this was proof that Samyaza had a perfect read of Zagan’s movements. What’s more, the black blade’s sturdiness surpassed all human understanding. Not only did it withstand Zagan’s fist, but Zagan actually felt his hand going numb from the impact. To add to that, there was no sign that the black flames of Purple Lightning were eating away at it at all.

And what of it? Purple Lightning is a form of Heaven’s Phosphor

meant to be usable as a martial art.

It was a technique that was most useful when fighting a stronger opponent. Zagan stepped even closer as if to slip under the blade and drove in his left fist, but Samyaza pulled its sword back. Even as it took Zagan's fist to its stomach, the demon brought the sword straight down.

"Oooh!"

Zagan let out a roar and swung his still-numb right fist. He repelled the black blade with a thunderous thud, but a bright red spray accompanied the clash once more.

My hand...broke?

The fist that had felled so many powerful enemies was shattered.

My regeneration won't make it in time!

Zagan's movements were highly accelerated, but the flow of his mana wasn't. His hand was starting to repair itself, but it wouldn't make it in time for the next attack.

"Will-o'-the-Wisp."

Small balls of Heaven's Phosphor coiled around Samyaza like fireflies. They didn't possess the destructive force of Fivefold Grand Flower or Purple Lightning, but they were special in that it was impossible to evade. Hundreds of fragments of Heaven's Phosphor rained down, but...

"A smokescreen, I see."

With a casual wave of its hand, the demon mowed down every last ball of flame. This form of Heaven's Phosphor lacked in penetration and destructive force, but it was still Heaven's Phosphor.

To think it would amount to no more than a smokescreen...

Just as Samyaza had predicted, Zagan's next hand was already prepared.

"Heaven's Scale Dragon Form!"

Taking on the shape of a dragon, this was the completed form of Heaven's Scale given artificial life, capable of autonomous offense and defense. The golden dragon opened its jaws and clamped down on Samyaza.

Dragon Form doesn't have the power to defeat this demon, but I can leave my defenses to it.

This sorcery's very purpose was to support Zagan.

"A puppet is no opponent of mine."

A single swing of Samyaza's blade bisected the golden dragon.

"Impossi— Guh!"

Zagan stopped moving for an instant due to shock. And of course, there was no way his opponent was going to grant him the grace of ignoring that opening. The demon grasped him by the face and slammed him into the ground.

“Gah!”

A red pool spread out beneath Zagan. He felt his consciousness fading.

It's too strong!

It obviously had no sorcery to devour, but even all of Zagan's sorcery and arts were useless. Bringing down the full force of Showers of the Wailing Dead would probably kill it, but Zagan wouldn't be able to last long enough to build the magic circle. Absolutely everything about this opponent was far beyond any enemy he'd fought before. And as his consciousness grew fainter, what suddenly came to mind was the face of his most hated enemy.

How would Bifrons fight this thing?

That Archdemon would likely choose to turn into tiny crystals and destroy their enemy from the inside out.

No, Bifrons wouldn't have committed to a real fight. That, or they would've run away after snatching a piece of the demon.

The Archdemon would then research it to empower themselves, then pick another fight at a later date. Either way, transforming into crystals wasn't sorcery, so Zagan couldn't imitate it. What about the other Archdemons, then?

More importantly, is this thing as strong as Azazel...?

When he tried to save Lilith and Furcas in that dream world, he'd seen something so terrifying that it felt like it could swallow the entire world. Samyaza was definitely strong, but was it so bad that it seemed meaningless to resist?

“Hmm. You still stand,” Samyaza said in admiration.

His fist was broken, blood poured from his head, and he was even pathetically bleeding from his nose. Nevertheless, Zagan stood up.

“It seems my power simply cannot reach you,” Zagan replied.

Everything he'd honed to defeat demons had been useless. However, this didn't mean Zagan was defeated. He pulled a ring from his pocket and placed it on his right ring finger.

“I'll be using this, Nephy.”

At his command, flames took shape and formed over his fingers. This was the birthday present he'd gotten from Nephy—Sonne.



“What the heck is going on...?”

Chastille stood stock-still in a daze among the hustle and bustle of Kianoides.

It feels like Zagan took something terrifying away from town.

Still, Chastille could tell that even Zagan wouldn't be able to manage on his own. He needed help. And just as she tried to step forward to chase him, her knees buckled.

“Huh...?”

Her legs were trembling violently. She was scared. She’d fought sorcerers and Archdemons before. She’d even stood against dreadful chimeras and that Sludge Demon Lord. Such was the case, but she froze in fear all the same. Seeing herself like this, she finally remembered.

“I see... It’s that one...”

It was the demon that’d been summoned during Zagan’s fight with Barbatos. Chastille had lost consciousness the moment she’d looked at it. If not, her mind would’ve shattered.

It came back?

In that case, they had to fight it this time. And just as she got back to her feet...

“Wah!”

“Huh?”

Upon getting up, Chastille bumped into someone.

So soft! And it smells so... Not now!

She’d apparently bumped into a woman. A flowery aroma tickled her nose. Even as she felt like she could get intoxicated on this scent, Chastille was an Angelic Knight. Thus, she immediately stopped the other woman from tumbling over and supported her.

“Huh? Nephy?”

“Oh, Chastille. Hello...”

That explained the softness and the good smell.

Is this perfume? I wonder if she’ll teach me about it later...

However, as that desire came to mind, Chastille shook her head vigorously.

“Sorry, are you hurt?” Chastille asked.

“I’m fine. You did stop me from falling over,” Nephy replied, smiling gently.

Chastille felt like her smile was a form of salvation. At any rate, it was a good thing she wasn’t wearing her Anointed Armor. If she was, she might’ve injured her precious friend.

“Nephy, did you sense that too?” Chastille asked after helping her stand up.

“Yes...”

“You’re going to go help Zagan, right? I’ll go too. Even if it’s a demon, I’ll be too ashamed to face Zagan if I’m always just getting beaten.”

She didn’t have the time to go back and get her armor, but she had her Sacred Sword on hand, so she could fight. Chastille convinced herself of this, but Nephy shook her head.

“No, please go to Lord Barbatos instead.”

“B-Barbatos? Umm, why...?”

Remembering that he was in the middle of a date with a beautiful woman, Chastille fell into a complete fluster.

“Have you not heard from Master Zagan?” Nephys asked, wide-eyed in surprise. “Lord Barbatos is in the middle of being headhunted by another Archdemon.”

“Huh...?”

Then was that woman’s intimate act simply an attempt to win him over?

But I have no right to stop that...

It didn’t look like the woman’s behavior had annoyed Barbatos. Besides, he was a sorcerer. Chastille would prefer that he remain on Zagan’s side, but maybe this was a chance for Barbatos too. As such, she had no right to get in his way. In the end, Barbatos had only ever protected her because of a contract. That was all their relationship amounted to. Chastille took a step back without thinking about it, but then Nephys firmly grabbed her shoulders.

“Why are you acting so timid?!” Nephys shouted. “Aren’t you in love with him?!”

“Hwah?! Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why do you know that?!”

“I can tell at a glance. You two are probably the only ones who think nobody has noticed.”

“qbieqajbQIbjqBP?!” Chastille screamed incoherently. Her face turned bright red and her eyes spun in confusion even as she recalled the sight of Barbatos and that woman having fun together. Her mind was so full of it that tears welled up in her eyes as she wailed.

“B-But I’m the only one who feels that way!”

Nephys looked back at her in astonishment.

“I don’t know how Barbatos feels,” Chastille continued. “He always protects me. And sometimes...really, just sometimes, he’s strangely kind, doing dangerous things out of sight, getting injured on his own... When I see him like that, my chest feels so tight.”

No longer knowing what she was even saying, Chastille covered her face.

“I don’t get it... I-It’s my first time feeling like this. It’s not like I don’t believe in Barbatos, but I wonder if I’m only forcing my selfish desires on him, or if he can find a much cuter girl...”

Once she started she couldn’t stop her words from gushing out.

“Chastille...”

Nephys let go of her shoulders, but shook her head as if changing her mind, then grabbed them once more and stared right into Chastille’s eyes.

“Chastille, do you remember when I tried to keep Master Zagan at a distance?”

How could she forget? Back when they first met, Nephys had been

crouching on the ground, making a face like the world was over, and Chastille had called out to her, unable to leave her be. Chastille returned a slight nod, and Nephly continued.

“When Master Zagan said he didn’t need me anymore, my entire world plunged into darkness. I had no idea what to believe in anymore. The one who gave me the courage to go back to him was you, Chastille.”

“Me...?”

During that incident, despite knowing that Zagan wasn’t the culprit, Chastille had been unable to do anything and had chosen not to be by his side. She really hadn’t been able to do anything.

“Because you believed in him, I decided to try to believe in the Master Zagan I knew too.”

I couldn’t become strong like she did.

Chastille bit her lip. She could do nothing but hang her head.

“So Chastille, please have courage,” Nephly said.

She’d heard those words somewhere before. Perhaps someone had told them to her already.

“All I know of Lord Barbatos is that, despite being a difficult person, Master Zagan relies on him as a friend above all others,” Nephly added resolutely. “But you know more about him, don’t you?”

“The Barbatos I know...”

He always called her names, cracked jokes, but had also given her that butterfly hair ornament, carried her to bed if she dozed off, yet would never do anything untoward to her.

Now that I think of it, he’s done some pretty crazy things for me...

Chastille unexpectedly managed to regain her composure.

“Chastille, please believe in the Lord Barbatos you know.”

Chastille pursed her lips and raised her head.

You sure are strong, Nephly.

In Chastille’s opinion, believing in someone required a lot of courage. When it came to love, it required even more. Nephly had overcome this a year ago. As such, Chastille nodded.

She wanted to respond to this girl’s hopes in her first friend. She wanted to be able to say that she’d helped the love between this girl and Zagan take shape. And so, she couldn’t possibly keep shrinking back from her own love.

“Thanks, Nephly. I’ll try believing in the Barbatos I know.”

“Right. Take care, Chastille.”

“I feel like you’re always the one comforting me,” Chastille said, feeling like she’d also seen this scene before.

And yet, Nephly shook her head as if it was no big deal and replied, “I’m simply returning the favor for what you did for me.”

With that, Nephly pulled a broom out of thin air. It floated on its

own and she then took a seat on it.

“I must be going too,” she said. “Master Zagan is giving it his all.”

“Yeah! I’m off to my own battle!”

Thus, the two girls rushed off to their own battlefields.



Chastille didn’t need all that much time to find Barbatos.

“God...dammit...”

He had also been fighting, after all. A female werewolf stood with the moon to her back, holding him up by the neck. Another defeated sorcerer was at her feet.

“Done already? Then I’ll be taking this boy with me,” the unfamiliar woman whispered.

“Ugh... That won’t do... I hate...working for free—Guh!”

The werewolf stomped on the sorcerer’s head.

There’s a second woman I don’t know?

However, blinded by love as she was and ignorant of the situation, Chastille couldn’t see what was going on as anything other than two women fighting over Barbatos. She felt something in her head heat up as she drew her sword.

“That man is mine! Get your hands off him!”

That magnificently mistaken declaration was, of all things, the starting signal for the counterattack.





“Gah!”

Crashing against a wall, Barbatos spat out blood.

She a fucking monster?!

Having the precognitive ability to dodge any and all attacks, including sorcery, then turning that around and using it for offense meant all of her attacks were impossible to evade.

Looks like she can only read one or two seconds ahead, though.

Still, for an Archdemon, a second was enough time to decide everything. Eligor casually waved her arm, and no matter how Barbatos tried to get out of the way, she had absolute accuracy. He tried to close in, but was slammed to the ground like a toy. The moment he stood up, Eligor’s claws were right in front of his eyes. Barbatos forced his body to twist out of the way, but her claws were wreathed in lightning.

“Gah?!”

He dodged the claws, but was seized by the branches of electricity. One beat later, Vepar jumped in with his floating sword, but Eligor warding that off with her claws too. This was a cursed sword that multiplied the more it was broken and continuously hounded its target. However, Barbatos was left in shock at the result.

“You’re shitting me?!”

Vepar’s cursed sword shattered so thoroughly that not even a fragment remained.

The hell was that? Vibrations...no, sound?

A powerful oscillation had ground the blade into dust.

“Tch! I guess the same trick won’t work twice,” Vepar grumbled.

Eligor then shifted her focus away from Barbatos.

“Ugh! Dodge it, Vepar!”

Vepar was no exception here. His body was already covered in wounds. Even if Barbatos had not said anything, he would’ve tried to dodge. He thrust his staff against the ground, activating some kind of sorcery—probably a ball of gravity—but Eligor warding it off as if it was nothing and simply thrust her claws forward. Vepar jumped back, but his path had already been read.

“H-Hak!”

Eligor’s long talons pierced Vepar’s torso, a repulsive violet hue clearly coloring his wound.

Now she’s using poison too?!

Why did Astrologian have no notable trait aside from seeing the future? Barbatos now knew the answer to that question. To put it simply, she was good at everything. She was capable of wielding any

sorcery with equal proficiency, even if she probably didn't surpass the other Archdemons in their own fields. There was no opponent more troublesome than her. After all, it meant she had no weak points.

It was impossible to attack her. It was impossible to evade her. She could use any sorcery. Even if they did manage to land a hit somehow, werewolves had terrifying regenerative abilities. If combined with sorcery, she would probably still recover after being reduced to minced meat. This was the reason Vepar's sorcery was being forced into submission too.

Thus although her one and only outstanding characteristic was being able to see the future, she was still far more powerful than anything Barbatos had ever fought before.

Using Libitina on us really was holding back.

If she went on a serious rampage, she would just trample her opponent. As such, she'd sealed her sorcery and had swung a chain around so that she wouldn't break them. Barbatos's mind seethed with humiliation.

"Gooooooddammit!"

He severed space and slammed that gap into Eligor. There was nothing in existence that couldn't be cut by this void blade. Eligor faced the incoming gap and tossed Vepar at it.

"Ward it off, Vepar!"

It was too late to stop the sorcery. Barbatos asked for the impossible against an attack that promised instant death.

"So unreasonable!"

The gap engulfed Vepar, but strangely enough, his body went right through it without being affected. Luckily, gravity was even capable of distorting space.

Just like I thought, I never wanna fight that guy!

And so, having slipped right through Vepar, the void blade assaulted Eligor from a complete blind spot. It was far too late to dodge.

"Child's play."

Eligor met the gap in space head-on with her claws. Doing such a thing should have sliced her fingers off. However...

With a loud snap, the gap in space shattered.

"You're shitting me..."

Barbatos was unable to conceal his shock.

"Think harder, little boy," Eligor said, shaking her clawed finger seductively. "A gap in space can be broken by slamming it against another gap in space."

She was capable of using all sorcery with equal proficiency. Naturally, that meant she could use space manipulation sorcery as well.

No, it should still be worse than mine.

If not, she wouldn't have gone out of her way to try to recruit him. Still, she was capable of space manipulation sorcery at a level close to Barbatos's. Up until now, Barbatos had never fought against somebody who used the same sorcery as him. That was the hopeless difference between an Archdemon who'd lived for centuries and a man who'd only lived a short twenty-one years.

Using the moment Barbatos had frozen at that thought, Eligor closed the distance and was now right in front of his eyes.

"Was that educational? Come now, class is over."

"Gah!"

She grabbed his neck and lifted him into the air. With her abnormal strength, not only could he not breathe, but even his blood flow was cut off. His vision started blacking out.

Should I hit her with that?

He had a single trick that would work against an Archdemon. It still wouldn't be enough to defeat one capable of regeneration, though.

"God...dammit..."

His arms went limp. Eligor then turned her attention to the prostrated Vepar.

"Done already? Then I'll be taking this boy with me," she whispered to him.

"Ugh... That won't do... I hate...working for free— Guh!"

Eligor mercilessly stomped on his head, and Vepar spat out blood.

Crap... We can't win...

Barbatos's vision was finally getting blurry. And as his consciousness started fading, what he saw on the back of his eyelids was that awkward girl's face. She looked like she was crying, but also angry. He'd never seen her like that before.

Why you making that kinda face...?

He'd staked his life so that she wouldn't have to feel that way, but it'd all gone to waste. She then screamed so loud it was enough to wake him up.

"That man is mine! Get your hands off him!"

For some reason, she was right there in front of his eyes. And as he slowly absorbed what she'd just said, Barbatos shouted right back.

"Haaah?! Who the hell is getting their hands on me other than you?! Don't fuck with me!"

He was now fully awake. He pulled a knife out of subspace and swung it at Eligor's arm.

This dagger's got a gap in space built into it!

She'd predicted this too, however. He didn't manage to hit her, but did manage to escape her grip.

“Gah! Hak!”

Barbatos threw a coughing fit as he picked up Vepar and got away from Eligor. He then turned to Chastille.

“You fucking dumbass! The hell’re you doing here?! Where the hell did you go to begin with?! I was worried stupid... Well, not really, but...”

“What’s happening here?” Chastille asked in confusion.

Barbatos took a look at her. She’d at least brought her Sacred Sword, but wasn’t wearing Anointed Armor. She clearly wasn’t equipped to take on an Archdemon. And yet, Chastille stepped forth as if to protect him.

“I don’t...really get what’s going on, but you’re fighting, right? I’ll help,” she said.

“Don’t be stupid. You can tell at a glance that she’s crazy dangerous, yeah?”

Chastille looked like she understood that well. Her Sacred Sword trembled in her grip. And yet, she turned a cheerful smile his way.

“Isn’t that the same as usual, Barbatos?”

Faced with that unreasonable rebuttal, Barbatos felt his body grow lighter.

I wonder why? I don’t feel like I can lose.

Just moments ago, things had seemed hopeless, but now he felt like he could do anything. And as he returned her smile, he heard a tremendously displeased voice under him.

“Can you leave that stuff for later?”

“Oh, you still alive, Vepar?”

Eligor’s claws were coated in poison. Vepar’s wound showed no signs of sealing. He couldn’t even stand up.

“Are you the Maiden of the Sacred Sword?” Vepar asked, turning to Chastille. “Can I consider you an ally here?”

“Of course...” Chastille answered. “But I’d like to hear the full details of what’s going on afterward.”

“Very well,” Vepar said, nodding. “Then you’re our ace in the hole... Barbatos, keep her busy for ten seconds.”

“That’s a crazy request,” Barbatos said.

“You can’t even manage that?”

Barbatos slammed his fist into his palm upon hearing that light provocation.

“Who the hell do you think I am? You really believe the great Purgatory can’t stall for a measly ten seconds? Look, buying time is fine and all, but you got a trick up your sleeve?”

“Not that I wanted to use it for something like this...” Vepar answered, smiling faintly. “Well, I’ll consider it a dress rehearsal for using it against Asmodeus.”

This sorcerer had created a means to defeat even an Archdemon.

“Hah. You don’t got no Anointed Armor, so make sure to stay behind me, Chastille.”

“And don’t you go dying on me either, Barbatos.”

With that, Barbatos entrusted his back to Chastille.

“Are you done discussing among yourselves?” Eligor asked, looking bored.

“Hah! How kind of you to wait for us,” Barbatos barked back.

“Haven’t I been extraordinarily kind this whole time?”

If they hadn’t crushed her reputation so badly, he figured she would’ve actually let them go after talking it out. In that sense, she was right.

I kinda feel this is all my fault...

Uncharacteristically, Barbatos actually realized this fact.

Chastille carefully helped Vepar up, then Vepar slowly opened his eyes, revealing deep azure irises.

Eligor’s complexion changed completely.

“[Thou art the one who vanishes with dawn. Wielding a rose finger, the one who mesmerizes all of creation.]”

Barbatos’s eyes shot open.

“Celestial mysticism?!”

This was the miraculous power usable only by high elves. Even as he recited the chant, it didn’t look like power was manifesting the same way it did for Nephy or Nephteros. The celestial mysticism Barbatos knew started manifesting the moment the prayer started. With each phrase spoken in Celestian, the power multiplied. And with the last verse, all the gathered power converged.

A misfire.

The moment that thought came to mind, light started gathering around Chastille’s Sacred Sword. Barbatos could tell that the power meant to envelop its caster like a protective shell was instead converging on her sword.

“You’re using celestial mysticism with my Sacred Sword as a medium?” Chastille said, the surprise evident in her voice upon sensing the power in her hands.

That’s more than enough to take down Asmodeus.

But there was no time to get excited about it. Right as Vepar had started chanting, Eligor had closed the distance and was right in front of Barbatos’s eyes.

“You’re in the way.”

“Aw, c’mon, don’t be so cold. Destruction Quake!”

In that instant, the world started shaking. To be precise, space itself was shaking with Eligor at its core.

“Aaagh!”

Eligor screamed for the very first time. The Archdemon who predicted all attacks and regenerated instantly even if she was hit collapsed to the ground. What's more, she vomited so much blood that it was as if all her internal organs had exploded.

"Hah! That's sorcery that hits you with the essence of space itself," Barbatos said, flipping her the bird. "Works pretty good, huh?"

Space had no holes or gaps in it. Space manipulation sorcery, however, wrenched a hole open in space. However, doing that would obviously strain space itself, creating cracks and causing serious damage to its surroundings. This could even have an influence on the sorcery being used. Getting teleported somewhere unfamiliar was one thing, but getting teleported into a rock or the like would prove fatal, and it was even possible to be tossed out into subspace and vanish forever. As such, magic circles or the like could be prepared at the departure and destination point to suppress the distortion of space. Barbatos's shadow was a medium for his sorcery while also acting as a manner of cushion for space. That was why he was capable of going anywhere whenever he wanted without anyone noticing.

But what if he created that phenomenon on purpose? What if he shook space itself, causing a shockwave, and slamming it into his opponent? It was impossible to see, made no noise, and struck a blow equally to every particle within its reach. It was impossible to defend against using any kind of sorcery.

"How's that? Hurts, don't it?" Barbatos asked. "I made this sorcery to slam against that asshole Zagan. Be grateful I used it on you."

"You shook...space? But how?"

This was sorcery even Eligor didn't know of. It felt so pleasant to hear her bewildered voice. Barbatos puffed out his chest and answered her with pride.

"I took my mansion in subspace, moved it through space, and rammed it against you!"

Barbatos's base remained suspended in Purgatory, the subspace he'd built for himself. However, the energy of an entire mansion colliding into a single point caused space itself to shake. That obviously meant the house suffered major damage too. The interior was probably a mess. Well, the place was already messy beyond hope to begin with, so that didn't really change much. This was Barbatos's do-or-die strike to try to overcome Zagan's ability to devour sorcery.

"Are you an idiot?!" Eligor screamed in astonishment.

"Say whatever you want!"

In terms of simple destructive potential, this was weaker than using a gap in space. However, even teleporting wasn't enough to evade this blow, and it was impossible to defend against using sorcery. It shook up its target's skin, brains, organs, and all other parts of their

body in equal measure. Barbatos had a hard time thinking up a way of inflicting more pain than this.

“Don’t...get...conceited!”

However, his opponent was a werewolf Archdemon. She wasn’t going to stay down for a whole ten seconds. In just one second, she was back on her feet and swinging her claws.

Take a good look. Even if it’s undodgeable, I can see the attack just fine.

Barbatos raised both his arms in a defensive stance. Eligor’s strike mercilessly slammed through his guard, but Barbatos didn’t collapse.

“That ain’t gonna work. Who do you think is out there punching me all the damn time?”

The only scary thing here was her claws. Taking a blow without getting hit by their sharp edges meant nothing. Barbatos did everything he could to evade the claws while ignoring getting hit in any other way. It didn’t matter if she could see the future and had absolute accuracy. Barbatos could at least shift the point of impact a little. After all, no matter how strong Eligor was, it looked like she was moving in slow motion compared to Zagan’s punches.

“[Lying in the threshold between sun and moon, accompanied by the wind, running across the sky alongside the light. Thus, thou art the first. The gospel that urges change and reform. The creator of stars, and the one who departs with them.]”

“Here ya go! One more time! Destruction Quake!”

Oh well, can’t use that no more.

Barbatos knew his mansion had just collapsed in on itself. He had nothing left to slam against his opponent after this. The thought of retrieving his research materials that were now scattered in subspace gave him a headache. If he wanted to make frequent use of this technique, he was better off preparing some sort of ammunition built for this purpose. By doing so, there was a risk of inflicting even more damage to his mansion in subspace, though. At any rate, this last shockwave he had at his disposal crashed into Eligor.

“Aaaaaaagh!”

Even if it was dilapidated, that was enough of an impact to shatter an entire mansion into smithereens. Bracing for the impact wouldn’t accomplish anything. After all, it was a blow meant to render such defenses meaningless to begin with. An Archdemon who’d lived for hundreds of years tumbled to the ground, writhing in agony.

Things would be so easy if this was enough to hurt that asshole Zagan...

No matter how much pain was inflicted on that man, he was sure to devote all his willpower into acting stoic. There was no way he would ever allow himself to appear so pathetic in front of Barbatos. In

fact, no Archdemon could possibly allow this disgraceful act.

“Aaah!”

Eligor rose to her feet and swung her claws upward. Even if he used both arms to defend himself, Barbatos couldn’t dodge it completely.

“Tch!”

He felt poison seeping in through the gashes in his arms. His nerves were now so sensitive that the slightest brush of wind felt like it was tearing his skin apart. It seemed this poison was meant to inflict pain as a form of revenge for his use of Destruction Quake.

Guess there’s no neutralizing the poison of an Archdemon on the spot.

Still, there was nothing more to it than the pain.

“Yo, what’s wrong, Eligor? This don’t hurt one bit.”

Eligor gulped, but Barbatos didn’t have any spare power to counterattack either.

Destruction Quake is outta ammo. All my other sorcery just gets read like a book, so I can’t do nothing.

All he could really do was stand there and take hits. But that simple act was something Eligor couldn’t understand. No matter how much she tore him up with her claws, no matter what sorcery she burned him with, Barbatos refused to take a single step back.

I’ve got the crybaby behind me.

He couldn’t afford to retreat. Overwhelmed by his spirit, or perhaps fearful of something she didn’t understand, Eligor stopped moving completely. And in that instant, the ten seconds he’d been entrusted with buying ended.

“[This is the first sound of the wind]—Avgi Xiphos.”

Vepar’s celestial mysticism was complete...and Chastille stepped forward.

“Angelic Confession Azrael.”

A pure white knight took shape from inside the Sacred Sword and charged at Eligor. Its one slash was accompanied by countless others.

Celestial mysticism that makes copies of the Sacred Sword?!

What’s more, the one wielding that blade was Chastille. Among all twelve Archangels, the Maiden of the Sacred Sword boasted the highest speed.

“Erk!”

Panic was clear in Eligor’s voice. As she was capable of predicting the future, the Archdemon surely saw her own fate.

“Shine, Azrael!”

This was a pincer attack between the Confession and Chastille’s high-speed sword. No matter what kind of reaction time she possessed, no matter how she read the attack, there was no getting away from it. Struck with more than a hundred slashes, the

Archdemon was finally defeated.



After putting on the ring he'd gotten from Nephy, Zagan kicked off the ground. Then, a black blade clashed with a flaming knuckleduster.

"Hmm..."

It wasn't enough to shatter the sword, but a large crack ran down its length. Still, even that was instantly repaired.

Does that mean the blade is also a part of its body?

Zagan looked at his ring. Even after clashing with a demon blade, the mithril ring hadn't broken. He could still fight. As such, Zagan took another step forward.

"Void."

All sound and color vanished from the world. This was extreme acceleration that approached stopping time itself. It was poor in a long battle and put a large burden on the body, so Zagan preferred the use of Shadow Sever. However, it was still the trump card of the strongest Archdemon.

Samyaza had been able to react to Shadow Sever, but wasn't moving at all in this time-frozen space. Zagan drove his fists in wildly. He broke its limbs, pierced its torso, and smashed its face to pieces, quite literally pulverizing the demon into dust. Immediately after he poured all of his strength into this mad rush, time started moving once more.

Without even being able to scream, Samyaza's body flew apart. There wasn't a trace of the demon left. This was a domain Zagan could only reach thanks to the durability and destructive force of Sonne. After all, his unprotected left hand was a sopping mess that couldn't be clenched into a fist. Nevertheless, Zagan witnessed further despair.

"No way! It's still regenerating?!"

He'd pulverized it without leaving a single fragment intact, but the demon reconstructed itself as if rewinding time. A few seconds later, Samyaza looked just as it had when it first appeared, standing still before Zagan. After seeing this abnormal feat of regeneration, Zagan finally understood.

No. What's here isn't its real body. It's just a terminal...or something like a clone.

It was like a shadow being cast on the ground. Thinking about it carefully, there was no way ten thousand demons could fit in such a small space. This was just a shadow being cast from elsewhere that was being manipulated remotely. Even if the glass was emptied, there was no end to this so long as there was more water to fill it back up

from the lake. As such, Zagan wouldn't even be able to put up a fight against it.

How can I kill this thing?

And just as he'd exhausted all his options...

"Master Zagan!"

A voice resounded from above. Zagan looked up at the night sky and spotted a girl clinging to a broom like she was falling down from the center of the moon.

"N-Nephy?!"

"Comet!"

A dazzling light enveloped Nephy and her broom.

A wall made of mana? That's not mysticism, it's sorcery.



Was this something passed down to her by Orias? No, it was likely Nephy's own original sorcery. It was extremely simple, but when amplified by a high elf's mana in the form of Hex Wings—and even going so far as adding the power of the Sigil of the Archdemon—it was a totally different story. It became unshakable defensive sorcery.

Nephy used the six wings on her back to accelerate even more. The reason the barrier looked like it was glowing was because the air in front of her was compressing and burning. An impact from that was enough to blow away a small village. Thus, descending like a literal comet, Nephy rammed Samyaza.

“Gah!”

Samyaza was caught by surprise thanks to the sudden intrusion and took the attack head-on. A circular shockwave spread out, kicking up an enormous cloud of dust into the sky. Even an amalgamation of demons couldn't withstand such an impact. It tore a trough through the earth and flew away. It was a dreadful blow, perhaps worthy of being called the Archdemon's Hammer.

Nephy really has put everything she has into her studies!

Happy as if this concerned him directly, Zagan pumped his fist. “Eeeeeek?!”

However, Nephy hadn't been able to nullify the recoil entirely either. And so, she once more flew off into the air and entered a tailspin as she fell to the earth.

“Nephy!”

Zagan somehow managed to catch her.

“Hwaaah...”

Nephy's eyes twirled about dizzily, but she hadn't suffered any serious wounds.

“How reckless!”

“Master Zagan,” she said clearly even though her eyes still weren't focused. “Will you forgive me?”

She didn't say for what, but Zagan still knew.

I'm no match for her... Zagan thought as he ruffled Nephy's hair.

“That was a good strike,” he said. “Can you hit it with an even bigger one?”

“L-Leave it to me!”

Nephy stood on her own two feet and held up Azazel's Staff. Six Hex Wings shined on her back once more as her lips quietly quivered.

“[Thou art the one who shines like the stars. The one who embraces balance, and arbitrates over good and evil.]”

Astraea Ekrixis—the celestial mysticism Nephy specialized in the most. Zagan had been saved by this power countless times, but now Nephy had the Sigil of the Archdemon and Hex Wings, so it was far

beyond comparison to before.

Zagan stepped forth to protect Nephy. Even after taking that hammer blow, Samyaza stood up as if nothing had happened and readied its black blade.

Take a good look!

Samyaza's body was an amalgamation of countless demons. Its mana flow was extremely complex, so even with his silver eyes, Zagan wasn't able to get a good read on it. However, he could at least see enough to defend himself. Even if his eyes couldn't follow the attacks, his body was capable of reacting instinctively.

Compared to the thirteen Archdemons, it's no more than a single blade.

It was far easier to deal with one sword than being attacked by the preeminent techniques of all thirteen Archdemons at once. This wasn't beyond his capabilities. Zagan slammed his ring against the flat of the blade, the sword unable to take the impact and breaking.

Looks like it's still a sword.

It was only natural for a thin blade to break when smashed from the side. The sword was also a part of Samyaza's body, so it regenerated in an instant, but that instant gave way to an opening.

“Whirling Wave!”

Zagan chose to create a raging whirlpool of mana, sorcery that was practically no more than child's play.

“[Be that as it may, balance is broken. Order is lost, and the earth is dyed in blood. While in grief, thou shalt throw thyself into the skies.]”

It was the sorcery once used by the pitiful man who hadn't even been able to become an Archdemon candidate. His little sister, Stella, had taken this sorcery to create the peerless sorcery called Antipode Wave, which was a mixture of mana and aura. What was now in Zagan's left fist was a different answer derived from the same sorcery. It seemed that when it was used by one with silver eyes, circumstances changed considerably.

“Gh, ah, ah, ah, ah, ah?!”

Samyaza raised its voice in bewilderment as the mana inside its body went wild. That only made sense. Zagan had completely messed up its mana flow from the inside out, after all.

“Guh?!”

Samyaza's body lost its human shape. Limbs sprouted from all over, transforming it into a bizarre monster.

“Like I thought, your amalgamated body falls apart if your flow of mana is disrupted.”

As a combination of numerous demons, an abnormality in its cohesion made it impossible for it to remain as a single entity. In

short, it was starting to split apart. However, if the ten thousand demons that made up Samyaza's body were released, that would be enough to destroy the world.

If only I saw Asmodeus's sorcery...

According to Foll, Asmodeus had used sorcery that rivaled Alshiera's Starbreak. It would probably be able to consign all ten thousand demons to oblivion, but unfortunately, Zagan hadn't seen it, so he couldn't steal the technique with his silver eyes. Instead, he wove a different kind of sorcery.

"Puppet Threads."

A total of ten threads stretched from all of Zagan's fingers. As the threads crawled into Samyaza's body, the demon came to a complete stop. This was the sorcery that Shere Khan had used to move his crippled body.

If he chose to use this on me instead, I may have suffered defeat back then.

This sorcery took over the nerves and usurped control of the body. Shere Khan had chosen not to settle things that way, so he had instead used it on himself. And luckily, it seemed the sorcery of the man who could've become Zagan's friend was even capable of dominating Samyaza's body.

"H-Hhhgh!"

Still, this was ten thousand demons, so Zagan's ten threads weren't enough to dominate them all.

But this is at least enough to keep it from moving!

That was where Zagan's role ended.

"[The lights of the heavens are all stars. All that shines far and wide plummets into a conflagration. With no compassion, no grief, no fear, and no suffering. This is the prayer of forgiveness]—Astraea Ekrixis!"

Lights fell from the heavens, gradually exterminating the swelling demon's body.

"Ooooooh!"

Letting out a scream of agony, Samyaza struggled to try to restore its body. Zagan stood right in front of it. As he clenched Sonne, several magic circles superimposed themselves on his hand. This punch had been Zagan's very beginning, the attack Shax had dubbed the Archdemon's Fist.

"Were you able to confirm humanity's potential?"

Zagan brought down his fist. This time, the terrifying king among demons vanished from Zagan's sight.



"That's...enough."

Even after eating the brunt of Chastille's full strength, Eligor staggered to her feet. Backed by celestial mysticism, not even an Archdemon could withstand such a blow. Transforming back from a werewolf, her wolf ears, claws, and tail vanished. Nevertheless, Barbatos felt a cold bead of sweat running down his cheek.

What? Does she still have some trick up her sleeve?

As if to answer that question, Eligor reached for her blindfold.

"Chastille! Finish her!"

Before Barbatos even finished yelling, Chastille unleashed a barrage of slashes, but her sword didn't touch Eligor a single time.

"Everything can just vanish."

And the very moment Eligor was about to tear off her blindfold, her hand came to a stop.

"Huh? Why'd you stop, Eligor?"

A girl stood behind Eligor, her voice so cheerful that it seemed totally out of place.

"Aha. I kinda wanna see them. I mean, you're always hiding your eyes behind that blindfold. I wanna know what kinda eyes you have, Eligor."

Linking her hands behind her back, the girl twirled with light steps and stood in front of Eligor.

"Aww, come on. Show me. Hm...? What's this? Eligor, it kinda looks like you're trembling. Are you cold? It's 'cause you're half-naked all the time."

An innocent smile flashed across the interloper's face. However, that same smile had everyone frozen in place.

Shit! She's in a totally different league...!

Even in perfect condition, Barbatos would've chosen to take Chastille and run away. Among all the Archdemons, she was clearly different. This was the Archdemon known as Asmodeus, a side of her Foll had never seen.

As a carbuncle, Asmodeus wasn't picky about her methods to steal back her people's core jewels. However, the reason she was truly notorious was because of "a certain something" she did to those who owned Spirit Blood. It was torture so severe that any who ever touched Spirit Blood would regret it from the bottom of their hearts. This was Asmodeus when she committed such vile acts.

Eligor still had hidden power. In all likelihood, it was enough to defeat Barbatos's group despite the current situation. However, the power this girl possessed was in a different dimension. It had nothing to do with affinity or strength. Before a tenacity that was akin to all of the world's malice concentrated into one being, it didn't matter what kind of power one possessed.

The only choice was to keep silent and let her steal what she

wanted. The same went for Eligor. An Archdemon who wielded such tremendous power now had sweat pouring down her brow and was panting heavily.

Silver hair and violet eyes. The girl with stars in her eyes twisted her lips into a crescent moon.

"I've always had a question," she said. "Why is your second name Astrologian? I mean, you call yourself a fortune teller, but you don't look at the stars to do it or anything, right?"

She then got close enough to nearly touch noses with her foe.

"Do you maybe have something else with stars on you?"

Asmodeus opened her starry eyes wide.

"For example, are your eyes violet with stars in them?"

Eligor began trembling pitifully. Asmodeus didn't say anything else. She simply continued staring at Eligor in silence as if fixated on the eyes hidden behind her blindfold. Asmodeus slowly wrapped her slender fingers around Eligor's neck. After staring at Eligor trembling for a little while longer, she started squeezing and—

"Aha! Just kidding. I may be an Archdemon, but I'm not the type to pry into other people's secrets, ya know?"

She laughed, then released Eligor's neck.

"Gah! Haaah! Haaah!"

Eligor collapsed to her knees while panting. Faced with this nightmarish scene, the only one capable of speaking was the one who'd witnessed it many times already.

"You're one to talk..." Vepar groaned.

Asmodeus turned her neck slowly and stared at him.

"Oh, long time no see, my beloved disciple. Is that poison? What a cruel thing to do to someone else's disciple. Do you have a band-aid? Shall I call you a doctor?"

There was no telling whether she was worried or making fun of him. Still, after a short pause, she affectionately hugged Eligor's shoulder.

"Wanna call it here and reconcile in deference to me? Well, even if you say no, I'll make you reconcile!"

"Asmodeus, do you even understand what the word reconcile means?" Vepar retorted.

"Jeez, lacking in charm as ever... Well, using celestial mysticism with a Sacred Sword as a medium was a pretty good idea. All that's left is securing a Sacred Sword that you can use whenever you want...and to get better at using celestial mysticism itself, I guess?"

As she spoke, a black robe wrapped around her. Barbatos could tell that it was opening a hole in space.

"Well then, everyone. Have a good day."

With those last words, Asmodeus and Eligor vanished from the

town. Barbatos fell to his knees, suddenly gushing sweat.

“Barbatos!”

“I’m fine...”

Or maybe he wasn’t. He’d used all his mana and wasn’t able to neutralize the poison. Nevertheless, he turned to Vepar.

“So that was Asmodeus? You really gonna bump her off?”

Vepar’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Barbatos,” he said, “are you one to give up just because your opponent is strong?”

“Well...you’ve got a point there.”

No matter how many times he was knocked down, Barbatos wouldn’t give up on defeating Zagan. Zagan had killed the teacher Barbatos had meant to kill himself, so snatching that from him could only be paid for with Zagan’s life.

No, maybe I don’t really give a crap about that no more.

He just wanted to defeat Zagan. The moment he beat his undesirable friend, Barbatos felt like he would finally be able to live his own life.

“Um, who exactly are you?” Chastille asked, turning to Vepar.

“You don’t look like a high elf, so how can you use celestial mysticism?”

“Oh, right. How’s that trick work?” Barbatos joined in.

“Do you truly believe I’ll reveal my secret?” Vepar grimaced, then turned his azure eyes up toward Chastille and sighed. “But I suppose I owe you one, Maiden of the Sacred Sword.”

After a short pause, Vepar reluctantly started speaking once more.

“The devices we now call Sacred Swords were originally meant to amplify celestial mysticism. Before the seraphs were sacrificed to them, that is.”

“Wha—?!”

What the Sacred Swords were before the seraphs were sealed within them. This was information even Zagan didn’t know. Satisfied by this reaction, Vepar continued his explanation.

“If you utilize that functionality, it’s possible to use celestial mysticism even if you’re not a high elf. Though, it does still require a certain disposition for it.”

Vepar then created his magic sword in his hand once more.

“This sword is a prototype for trying to replicate that functionality. Well, this one’s a failure, but I did get some results. It’ll take some time, but it looks promising.”

“Th-Then...you’re trying to make a new Sacred Sword?” Chastille asked in shock.

“Precisely. I doubt any sorcerers know more about Sacred Swords than I do, including the Archdemons, so I’m confident I’ll succeed.”

“There ain’t no sorcerers researching Sacred Swords,” Barbatos said, snorting. “Breaking the damn things would make more sense.”

“Don’t go thinking about breaking the Sacred Swords. How insolent,” Chastille said, hugging her sword as if to protect it and glaring at Barbatos.

“Huuuh? Sacred Swords are a total pain in the ass for us, ya know?”

“That’s why they’re a necessary deterrent.”

“Haaah... I want to go home,” Vepar said, sighing as if he was genuinely fed up with their lovers’ quarrel.

And so, their argument went on and on, none of them knowing that Vepar’s talent was exactly what Zagan currently wanted information on most.

“Man, I’m spent. Don’t make me use up even more energy... Whoa!”

Barbatos stood up as he waited for Vepar to recover from his wounds. However, he hadn’t neutralized his poison either, so he staggered feebly. Chastille slid under him and kept him from falling over.

Huh? Did she always smell this good...?

He was used to her being sweaty, so this was pretty refreshing.

“Hm...? What is it?” Chastille asked.

As he stared at her, he suddenly looked up at the sky. But that felt like he was avoiding her gaze, so thinking this could be interpreted as him running away, he looked right back at her again and managed a smile.

“It’s nothing. Let’s go back, crybaby.”

“Don’t call me that.”

Thus, the unprecedented victory over an Archdemon by these three finally came to an end.

Epilogue

“You’re back, Eligor.”

After returning to Marchosias’s old castle, a young man wearing round glasses greeted Eligor. Next to him stood a man with slit-thin eyes. Lord of Murder Glasya-Labolas was nowhere to be found. It seemed the madman had already been sent out on another mission.

“By the looks of it, things haven’t gone that well,” the slit-eyed man said sympathetically. “I assume the results are...?”

Eligor ignored him and bowed to Marchosias.

“Marchosias. I’ve failed to lure the sorcerer in question to our side.”

“I see... If you failed, then that was fate. Don’t worry about it. Your astrology isn’t a power that can be used very often, after all.”

The humiliation was difficult to bear. This man refused to even criticize her failure. Instead, the slit-eyed man spoke up.

“That said, the ‘door’ opening is a definitive future, right? In that case, we can still recover. It’s no big deal who opens it... The program will be somewhat complicated to put together, though.”

“This isn’t much of a substitute, but I did bring back one boon,” Eligor said.

“Hmm...?”

“Asmodeus’s weakness.”

For the first time, Marchosias’s expression changed.

Nobody can defeat Asmodeus.

Naturally, when Marchosias had gotten Asmodeus on his side, he’d taken countermeasures against her treasury. However, the power that Archdemon possessed far surpassed his assumptions.

The Calamitous Moon of Hades... Before such power, nothing can be done.

Even other Archdemons wouldn’t be able to so much as put a dent in it. Counting the slit-eyed man among their forces wouldn’t help in the least. Asmodeus lived with the resolve to purge all the other Archdemons. That tenacity surpassed even the power of all other Archdemons.

At best, it would end with both parties dead. At worst, Marchosias’s entire group would be slaughtered. Asmodeus was necessary to Marchosias’s plans, but nobody could really control her. She was currently his greatest problem, but a resolution was finally in

sight.

“Then let’s move our plans to the next stage,” Marchosias said.

The man who saw all life, including his own, as no more than a tool quietly started making his move.



“S-So you can dress like that too...”

One week later, on Chastille’s birthday, Barbatos and Chastille went out into town together.

Those assholes Zagan and Vepar had to go spouting that crap.

He was taking Chastille out for a meal, but when he tried to go wearing his usual robe, Zagan had punched him mercilessly. As a result, he was wearing a very non-sorcerer-like outfit just like the other day composed of a dress shirt, trousers, and several earrings in his ears. He’d also been forced to tie his hair back.

Eligor beat the crap outta me when I dressed like this, so I don’t really like it...

If he’d had his usual equipment, he wouldn’t have been driven against the wall. That said, Chastille was also wearing flashier casual clothes than usual.

As a whole, the basic theme was blue. Her skirt went up into a corset that was decorated with finely detailed brass buttons. Her shirt was also different from usual, her collar and such accented by extravagant frills. She wore a jacket with relatively short sleeves that was left open, and the red ribbon at her chest was dazzling.

This girl was apparently a noble, but her family had fallen into poverty, so she’d let go of any luxuries like dresses and ornaments. And yet here she was, doing her best to dress up in a dignified manner beyond her means. She also had her hair down, somehow making it light and wavy. It shined under the sun like polished copper.

Crap. Why’s my heart pounding like crazy?

Barbatos’s eyes wandered restlessly as he scoffed.

“W-Well, you’re wearing different clothes from usual too, yeah...? It’s that, right? Anyone can look good with the right clothes...”

Barbatos vaguely knew that was more of an insult than a compliment, but he didn’t know any other sayings about clothes. This naturally had Chastille grimacing in anger.

“Can’t you just say it suits me? Today is my birthday, remember?”

“Like hell I’d say something so embarrassing!”

“Hwah?”

Both of them were long past their limit. Chastille twirled a finger in her hair to try to hide her discomposure.

“N-Nephy and Nephteros did my hair for me. They picked my clothes too.”

“H-Hmmm. Well, they’re always dressed nicely ’cause of that bird lady’s hobby or something...”

“Mhm. I also thought of relying on her at first, but Nephy stopped me with a crazy look in her eyes.”

Barbatos should’ve been thanking Nephy with his head to the ground, but unfortunately, he didn’t understand how much danger Chastille had tried to put herself in. And just like that, not holding hands the entire way, they quickly reached their destination.

“Barbatos? Is this really the place? It looks expensive.”

“I got no clue about the price, but this is the right place, yeah.”

Zagan had apparently paid for everything already. For Barbatos’s lousy friend to be so generous made it feel like there was a catch, but lately, Barbatos had gotten dragged into a continuous stream of strange events because of him. Barbatos interpreted this as Zagan’s way of apologizing. An extravagant bell decorated the door, and a man in a refined jacket stood in front of it.

“Welcome to our establishment. You are Lady Chastille Lillqvist and Mister Barbatos, I presume?”

“Y-Yeah.”

“Th-Thank you for having uth.”

Overwhelmed by the restaurant’s atmosphere, Chastille quickly fumbled over her words. Giving it some thought, this was the first time Barbatos had even been welcomed so courteously by a stranger, so he was taken aback too. It turned out the entire place had been reserved and nobody else was inside—Zagan’s consideration so that they wouldn’t bother others, perhaps. Their orders had already been taken care of too, so upon taking their seats, food was already being brought out to them. The first thing placed on the table was an aperitif.

“Huh? It comes with wine too? Now ain’t that sensible. The portion’s kinda stingy, though.”

“Huh? This is alcohol?” Chastille said, her face stiffening. “What do I do? Is it okay for me to drink too?”

“You’re eighteen starting today, yeah?”

According to the church’s laws, drinking alcohol was permitted at eighteen years of age. Despite this, Chastille glared cautiously at the glass.

“I tried a little on impulse before, but I couldn’t even move my body afterward. It was a lot of trouble.”

It did seem like she was better off not having any, so Barbatos took Chastille’s glass.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she protested.

“I mean, there’s no point having it here if you can’t drink, right? I’ll take it. It don’t taste bad at all.”

“I’m an adult too, you know? Um, I have...just a little interest,” Chastille mumbled as she took the glass back, holding it in both hands with a serious look. “Umm, is there a correct way to drink this?”

“Not at all. Just gulp it down.”

The waiter watched them anxiously like he had something to say, but Barbatos showed no signs of noticing his gaze. Before long, for some reason, Chastille dipped a spoon into her glass. It was truly admirable of the restaurant’s staff to watch in silence without saying anything upon witnessing that. Filling about half her spoon with the translucent liquid, Chastille carefully brought it up to her mouth...then poked out her tongue.

Does anyone really drink like that...?

Not quite understanding why, Barbatos was shaken by the sight of her bright red tongue doing its best to lick the contents of the spoon.

“Oh, this is good...I think,” Chastille said, her eyes widening.

“Th-That so...? Man, the booze here works fast.”

“Does it?”

Barbatos fanned his face with his hand, then threw her a question.

“Hang on, this ain’t your first time drinking, right?”

In that case, there was no need for Barbatos to teach her or anything. And yet, Chastille’s next words were completely unexpected.

“That’s true, but this is my first time drinking with someone else.”

“Hgh...”

The fact that he was her first loosened his cheeks for some reason. At any rate, she didn’t seem to have the courage to gulp it down yet, so she made her way through her glass little by little as if lapping away at the drink.

Silence followed. For some reason, neither could say anything. This lasted until their next dish came. Unable to stand the silence, Barbatos spoke up first.

“Oh, it’s your birthday, yeah?”

“M-Mhm.”

“So...here.”

In contrast to his blunt tone, Barbatos placed a small box with a cute ribbon on the table.

“Huh? Is this...?”

“Take it.”

Chastille’s eyes turned to saucers. Seeing her cheeks flush a little, Barbatos was no longer able to look at her directly. Not realizing his own neck was bright red, he averted his gaze. Chastille also hung her head in bewilderment, but Barbatos didn’t think it was just his imagination that she looked somewhat pleased.

“Umm, thank you... Can I open it?” she asked.

“Well, yeah...”

Chastille opened the box, then raised her voice.

“Wow. Are these ear ornaments?”

Inside was a pair of earrings decorated with vivid green gems.

“They’re called earrings.”

“So pretty... Um, how do you put these on?”

Chastille picked one up to look and cocked her head. She’d apparently never put on an earring before. Barbatos pointed at the earring’s needle.

“You make a hole in your ear and jam that needle through it.”

“A-A hole? You can make holes in your body?”

“Don’t phrase it all weird!”

Although, giving it some proper thought, he could see how a girl who wasn’t even a sorcerer would be somewhat against the idea.

Vepar, you ass! Earrings ended up being a problem!

His irrational anger flared up, and he took the earring from Chastille’s hand.

“My bad. I’ll think of something el—”

“W-Wait!”

She squeezed the hand he’d used to take the earring from her. Her hands were so soft and slender that one wouldn’t think she wielded such an enormous sword all the time.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-What?”

“Um, you wear them too, right?” Chastille asked, turning her eyes to his ear. “Then I want to try them...”

“You sure?”

“Y-You went out of your way to pick them out for me, so...” she trailed off. With that, she brushed back her hair to reveal her ear. “S-So do it for me!”

“I’m doing it?!”

“I mean, I’m too scared to do it myself.”

Barbatos was at a sudden loss for words.

“D-Don’t complain if it hurts, got it?”

“Wait...it really hurts?”

“No, it just stings a little... I’ve got a bunch stabbed in my ears too.”

“Really? I’m trusting you here, okay?”

Feeling somewhat strange now, Barbatos’s eyes wandered even more.

“Th-Then, here I go...”

“Yeah. Please do it quickly.”

Chastille closed her eyes as if in prayer. What then drew Barbatos’s eyes were her small lips.

No, no, no, no, no... The hell’re you thinking about?!

Resisting the urge to press his lips against hers, Barbatos touched

Chastille's ear.

"Eep!"

"D-D-D-Don't make weird noises!"

"I-I can't help it! Ears aren't, um...really somewhere other people touch, right?"

Barbatos started to feel like this was more and more perverse when the thought of poking a needle through such a place struck him. Shaking his head, he once more got the earring in place.

"Okay, this time for real. Ready?"

"Mhm. I'm ready."

Barbatos then pushed the earring's needle through her finely shaped earlobe.

"Oooooooooooooow!" Chastille screamed at the top of her lungs. "You liar! That hurt like crazy!"

"I didn't lie! You're just a crybaby!"

"What's wrong with crying after being stabbed with a needle?!"

Still, Barbatos was shaken to the core by this too.

"Gah, dammit. Don't move. You're gonna get blood on your clothes."

"B-Blood? I'm bleeding?"

"I-I-I-It's fine. Look, this kinda thing heals right away."

Barbatos went as far as using healing sorcery to stem the bleeding, then wiped the sweat from his brow. Upon noticing Chastille's teary glare, he returned to his senses.

"U-Uh... It suits you..."

"Gah! Y-You can't brush it off like that!"

In that moment, her ears weren't bright red because of any bloodstains. Chastille then turned her other ear toward him.

"Don't make the next one hurt, got it?"

"You putting on the other one?"

"I'll be unbalanced wearing only one, right?"

And as expected, Chastille's scream resounded in the restaurant once more. Incidentally, Vepar would later scold him, saying, "Are you a beast? If you're going to give someone piercings, then use proper tools to make the holes and anesthetize it while you're at it," but that's a story for a different time.

"That was delicious."

After their meal ended, Chastille left the restaurant with a blissful hand on her cheek, unable to believe how good the meal had been.

"Well, it wasn't bad."

Barbatos usually never cared about how food tasted, but it had been good enough for him to approve of it too.

"I see... So food can taste this good," Chastille muttered sincerely. "I didn't know."

“Yeah.”

Zagan’s desire to teach these two what proper food tasted like, seeing that they both had a catastrophic sense of taste, showed the slightest hope of bearing fruit.

“Well, thank Vepar next time around,” Barbatos said with a satisfied smile. “That ass helped out a bunch.”

Hearing that name, Chastille trembled.

“Um, can I ask you something? What kind of relationship do you have with her?”

Barbatos cocked his head.

“Her? Vepar? He’s a dude, you know?”

“Huh?”

Chastille was in shock.

“Don’t say that to his face, got it?” Barbatos said, lowering his voice. “He snaps when he’s treated like a woman. That’s why I always tell him to dress more like a man, but he... Uh, hey?”

Chastille froze, completely pale to the face. Barbatos shook her shoulder and she finally came back to her senses.

“O-Oh... I-Is that so? Ha ha... Ha ha ha...”

Seeing her reaction, Barbatos suddenly felt anxious.

Is that kinda guy her type...?

Vepar was, in fact, so beautiful that it was a waste for him to be a man. It made sense for Chastille to have her heart stolen by him.

Hang on, in that case, she wouldn’t have come along on what’s pretty much a date, yeah?

Barbatos agonized over this when a bundle of paper suddenly wrapped around his leg.

“Huh? The hell’s this?”

He picked it up. It looked like a gossip rag. It was awfully flimsy for one, though. Maybe it was an extra completely separate from the main newspaper? Chastille took a look at it too and knit her brow.

“An extra edition of the newspaper? Was there some kind of incident?” she asked.

“Looks like it.”

The other day, an Archdemon and demon had rampaged about. Some other abnormality might have occurred. With that in mind, the two looked at the headline and froze.

“The Maiden of the Sacred Sword’s passionate love story! Her partner is the sorcerer closest to becoming an Archdemon?!”

“Haaaaaah?!” the two screamed in unison.

The article went on to make sport of Chastille and Barbatos. That wasn’t all either. It looked like an illustration was printed on the paper, but it started moving on its own and speaking.

“That man is mine! Get your hands off him!”

“Haaah?! Who the hell’s getting their hands on me other than you?! Don’t fuck with me!”

This was the sorcery Barbatos, Zagan, and Gremory had developed together—Memorandum. It was used to project memories of the past. But wait, who could’ve been watching at the time?

“Oh.”

Returning to their senses, the two looked around. The newspaper had already been spread around. The townspeople—Angelic Knights and sorcerers being no exceptions—looked back at them inquisitively.

“Y-You assholes! This ain’t no show!”

Just as he yelled, the gossip rag also played a voice.

“Y-You assholes! This ain’t no show!”

The words Barbatos had just screamed were immediately reproduced. He turned the page in a panic...where his and Chastille’s shocked figures were reflected.



“It’s being broadcast in real-time?!”

“B-B-B-Barbatos?! Wh-Wh-Wh-What do we do?!”

“C-C-C-C-Calm down? Th-This don’t mean...”

As the two panicked, people started clapping around them.

“Congratulations!”

“You suit each other!”

“May you have everlasting happiness!”

“I hope you explode!”

All around them came words of blessing.

“Quit celebrating dammmiiiiit!”

Ignoring Barbatos’s shriek, the blessings and clapping showed no signs of stopping. This newspaper was being distributed across the entire continent, including the Holy City Raziel. It was sure to bring a great change between Angelic Knights and sorcerers, who’d only known hostility between each other up to this point.

Two figures watched this play out from far away.

“You truly are terrifying.”

“Hmph! I’ll take that as a compliment.”

Seeing that she’d completed the job he’d entrusted her with far beyond what he would’ve considered perfect, Archdemon Zagan spared no expense rewarding Enchantress Gremory.



“Sis, these two are the ones at the Archdemon’s place, right?”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! It’s causing a huge uproar, huh?”

In the Holy City Raziel, Lisette looked at the newspaper pinned to the post box while Stella roared in laughter.

“Haaah... Is this Zagan’s doing? I’m surprised he thought up something so mean.”

“Sis, you’re laughing too much.”

Even as she chided her, Lisette couldn’t hold back a smile of her own.

“Lady Diekmeyer,” a man yelled. A group of Angelic Knights was running toward the two girls. “A meeting has been called. Please return to the cathedral immediately!”

“Aha. No point discussing it now. I’m pretty sure it’s too late.”

It was obvious what the meeting was going to be about.

“Lisette, I’ll be off for a bit.”

“Sis, take your work seriously, okay?”

“Oh, come on. I always play around seriously.”

Stella waved energetically and left.

“Oh well...”

Lisette sighed and started walking in the opposite direction. The

city was in a huge uproar, but she had school to go to. And as she was on her way there...

“...?”

She felt a strange presence...or voice. It was like someone was calling out to her. She came to a stop and turned toward the source of the voice and saw a gloomy alleyway.

I wonder what it is? Should I call sis?

That said, Stella looked busy. Lisette held a book in front of her like a shield and peeked down the alley.

“Is someone there?”

A groan responded to her call. It sounded like it was in pain.

Is someone hurt down there...?

She took a quiet breath and entered the alley.

“Are you okay? Do you need me to call someone?”

She proceeded farther down the alley while calling out to the figure...and eventually found someone on the ground.

A sorcerer...?

It was too dark to see properly, but she could tell they were wearing a robe. She called out once more, prompting the figure to mumble in grief.

“Solomon failed. Humanity never truly possessed any potential.”

The faceless shadow lamented in disappointment.

Afterword

It's been a long time, everyone. I have come to deliver *An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride Volume 16*. I'm Fuminori Teshima.

Barbatos's unexpected popular season has arrived! His partners are Archdemon Eligor, a sorcerer in Marchosias's camp, and Vepar, a former Archdemon candidate who got dragged into this predicament despite having nothing to do with it. However, Barbatos still hasn't decided on a birthday present for Chastille. In the background of such...machinations?...the monster that once instilled fear in Zagan makes a return. Will the plan to create harmony between Angelic Knights and sorcerers go well?

In any case, this is the story about what happened in the background while Foll was giving it her all and Nephy's birthday party was going on in the last volume.

Despite splitting off from a subplot, volume 16 ended up being as thick as volume 15. How did that happen...?

But thanks to making it two volumes, I got to write everything I wanted to, so it was really satisfying as an author. Misunderstandings really suit Barbatos and Chastille well.

Leaving things there for this volume, I have a report to give everyone.

An Archdemon's Dilemma: How to Love Your Elf Bride the anime is in the works!

Wow! It's an anime version, everyone! We get to see Zagan and Nephy move and talk! It's been such a long journey to get here!

I want to get really excited about a whole lot of things, but I'll leave things here for now. For more details, please wait for follow-up reports on social media and such.

Also, in addition to volume 16, manga volume 9 and the spinoff with Barbatos as a protagonist, *An Archdemon's (Friend's) Dilemma: How to Babysit a Crybaby Knight Volume 3*, are also going on sale at the same time!

The manga has entered the visiting home arc, so we get to see a tiny Nephy running about. The destructive force of three little girls bringing Zagan down to his knees for the first time with their, "I love you, daddy!" is tremendous, so I insist you see it for yourself!

The spinoff takes place between volume 3 and 4 of the novel

(between the evening ball and visiting home arcs). Please enjoy the sight of the two blissfully unaware fools. Incidentally, you also get a glimpse of Vepar, who made his appearance in this volume too.

And now, for recent affairs. I'm doing my first new series in a good while with Famitsu Bunko! It's been about two years, I think? The title is *The Broken Ultimate Weapon Wants to Learn About Love* (temp). It's a fantasy rom-com about someone who digs up a mysterious capsule from an ancient ruin and releases the ultimate weapon, which turns out to be a girl who makes him her master. I believe I'll be able to get it into your hands this December.

Also, I've been thinking of buying a cat. There's an association looking for foster parents, so I'm in the middle of making visits there and such. There are matters of compatibility and the like, so it isn't something that can be decided right away, but I'm hoping we can make things work.

Now then, allow me to offer my thanks to everyone involved.

To my chief editor, A, who I once more have to apologize to for making another thick volume. To COMTA, who once more offered gorgeous illustrations (the two-page spread is particularly amazing!). To the manga artist, Hako Itagaki, who also does the storyboard for the spinoff. To the spinoff manga artist, Momo Futaba. To the editors for both manga. To everyone involved with cover design, proofreading, publicity, and such. To my children, who always make me snacks and dinner and such. And to you, my dear readers, who are holding this book in your hands at this very moment.

Thank you very much!

October 2022: Having Lunch as the Scent of Fragrant Olive Wafts
Around Me
Fuminori Teshima

Bonus Short Stories

Together So Long They Don't Worry About Being Seen

"What's wrong, Levia?"

Behemoth was walking through town on his way to the dock when Levia suddenly stopped in her tracks. He followed her eyes, then understood what was going on.

"Ice cream? Oh yeah, the boss said he made a tool to help people make the stuff, huh? Hey buddy, I'll have two."

After he quickly addressed the shopkeep, two servings of ice cream were ready right away.

"How impressive it is to be able to mass-produce such a feat," Levia finally said in admiration.

"Here ya go."

Levia had both her arms restrained by her clothes, so Behemoth held out one of the ice creams and she licked away at it without hesitation.

"How's it taste?"

"No objections. You should eat too, Behemoth."

After giving her brief impressions, in complete contrast to before, she started biting into it fiercely. She seemed to like it considerably.

"Hey now, don't spill any," Behemoth said. He then went to start eating his own...when Levia bit into that one from the side as well.

"Levia...?"

His slightly reproachful tone had Levia blinking as if she'd regained her senses.

"Oh, sorry. I wasn't thinking..." she said.

Taking a closer look, he noticed that Levia had already finished her portion.

That's way too fast.

Behemoth sighed in resignation and held out the other portion of ice cream.

"If you like it that much, you can have this one too," he said.

"No... That's yours, Behemoth. I can endure," Levia replied with resolution, desperately holding back her drool.

He did think she should just eat it if she wanted it that badly, but Levia probably wanted Behemoth to try it too. Sympathizing with that feeling, Behemoth took a bite of the ice cream.

"Oh, this really is tasty... Oops, I did it now."

Much like how Levia's body was restrained by her clothes, Behemoth's face was wrapped in bindings. He ate and drank through a gap between them, but he'd gotten ice cream on his face. Seeing this, Levia got up on her tiptoes with familiarity and brought her face closer to Behemoth. She then licked the ice cream off his cheek.

"Mmm, I got it."

"Hey now..."

Even with a hint of criticism in his voice, he didn't protest more than that as the two walked on—leaving the clamoring passersby behind.

Colleagues Are Not Necessarily Friends

"Say, Asmodeus, may I ask you something?"

"What's up, Eligor?"

"Why do I have to eat something like this with you?"

For some reason, the two Archdemons were ordering ice cream at a street corner in Kianoides.

"Aha, do you maybe have no idea how to eat it? Must be 'cause you wear that blindfold. Shall I take it off for you? C'mon, take it off. Hey, hey."

This was immediately after a certain incident, so they couldn't overstay their visit. Well, even before all that...

"I'm pretty sure I'm fated to be killed by you..."

"Aha? So you say, hmmm? How pitiful. My sympathies."

Eligor was left dumbfounded.

"Well, it seems that isn't 'now.' Good for you," Asmodeus said with a smile, not showing the slightest hint of timidity. "Actually, I missed the chance to finish eating a parfait at a shop last time I was here, so I wanted to have it now."

"So...why did you bring me with you?"

"I mean, it's too much for one person. I'll get tired of it before it's done. But when it comes to all things, including food, I don't like being wasteful, so doing that would be pretty hard to accept."

"What you handed me seems to be different from this...parfait thing you mentioned, though."

"This is a new commodity called ice cream! When there's something new on the menu, isn't it human nature to want to start by trying that first?"

"I'm pretty sure that's just you."

That said, if they bickered here, this ice cream thing would melt. No, it was already starting to melt, so Eligor used sorcery to manipulate the temperature and maintain its state. Asmodeus also did the same, meaning two Archdemons were wielding sorcery for such a

trivial reason. Asmodeus took a lick of her ice cream, but cocked her head with a strange look on her face.

“Hmm. Well, it is pretty tasty, but is that it?”

“Does it not suit your tastes?”

“The parfait was tastier. It’s supposed to be made of the same stuff, though...”

Asmodeus remained like that for a moment, then let out a sigh of realization.

Ohhh... I get it. It’s because I was with her back then.

Eligor tilted her head in confusion as Asmodeus then held out the ice cream in her hand to her.

“I’m tired of it, so you can have the rest.”

“Can you not treat me like I’m here for waste disposal?”

The Archdemon who never listened to others had already vanished.

“I don’t really like sweets...”

Eligor took a single lick of the ice cream herself, then vanished as well.

Misunderstanding the Black Cat and a Headache

“Mister Shax, it says they have ice cream.”

Kuroka’s two tails swayed about as she came to a sudden stop. Taking a closer look, a restaurant had a sign up saying “You can eat all the ice cream you want here!”

“Oh, now that you mention it, the boss made a weird tool and had it circulated around.”

The production of ice cream was extremely troublesome, so it was a luxury good. However, this device apparently allowed it to be easily created even by normal people. Naturally, the Archdemon had done this so that his beloved bride could enjoy it at any time. Kuroka nodded, then repeated what she’d said.

“It seems they have ice cream.”

“Umm, wanna try some?”

“Not really, but it’s ice cream.”

“Shopkeep, can I get two?”

Shax sighed in resignation as he bought some of this ice cream. It was a strange food consisting of a cup made of what looked like a baked scone filled with a white paste that was similar to fresh cream. Thinking back on it, there was some at Zagan’s birthday party as well, but this was Shax’s first time having any.

The boat’s gonna be leaving soon...

“Hwah... So this is ice cream...”

Well, Kuroka’s eyes were shining happily, so he decided this was

totally fine.

“Mister Shax, can I have it now?”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

With that, Kuroka poked out her red tongue and took a lick of the ice cream. Perhaps because it was sweet, or because it was cold, Kuroka’s eyes widened and her back trembled. She then began eating the white cream with gusto, but still did so with little licks. At that moment, she looked just like a cat lapping away at water.

You really gotta lick it like that?

Shax found himself having to pound at his chest to get himself to calm down. Seeing her so happy, he broke into a smile.

“Ah!”

Despite being a fairy who governed luck, this girl suffered from habitual misfortune like some manner of recoil. The bottom of the baked cup suddenly broke with no warning.

“Aaah...”

Hearing her mutter so sadly, Shax held out his own ice cream.

“No need to be so sad. C’mon, you can have mine.”

“Huh? But Mister Shax...”

Kuroka looked embarrassed, but immediately gathered her resolve and licked his ice cream.

Huh? I gotta hold it?

Well, if Kuroka held it, the bottom might break again, so he had no other choice. Still, watching the girl who’d become his lover lap away at it so seriously was a dangerous sight...in all sorts of ways.

“D-Do you like it that much?” he asked.

“Yes. It’s sweet and cold, yet soft and very delicious!”

“Th-That so?”

“Won’t you have some too, Mister Shax?”

“Aren’t you...?”

In the middle of talking, Shax noticed that while Kuroka’s face was red, she was smiling as if challenging him.

This girl! She’s saying this knowingly, yeah?

That said, Shax was an Archdemon now and Raphael had approved of their relationship, so he couldn’t let himself be made a fool of all the time. He opened his mouth wide and bit a chunk out of the ice cream Kuroka had been licking.

“Oooh, it really is sweet... Hm, what’s up?”

Kuroka turned bright red, her eyes shooting wide open as her two tails stood on end. Despite always tempting him, she was the type to end up like this when put on the receiving end. It made him want to ask why she always teased him. Shax returned a smile, slightly red to the cheeks himself, and Kuroka hung her head, her blush going all the way to her human ears.

“Um, uh, I was thinking of buying you another one because I ate yours...” she said.

Taking a closer look, Kuroka had been in the middle of taking out her wallet.

“Hgggh!”

At the same time, Shax crouched down as a headache assaulted him.

“M-Mister Shax? Are you okay?”

“D-Don’t worry about it.”

In the end, he was better off not doing things he wasn’t used to. The headache from eating too much cold food at once was his just deserts.



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by Fuminori Teshima

Translated by Hikoki
Edited by DxS

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